

OVER AND OVER AGAIN

Today's passages are a theological dissertations. The focal topic is love, ... but there is more to love than romance and emotional attachment.

From the Mark text, we're told that one of the scribes listening to Jesus fairing well in a debate, asked Jesus a pointed question.

It wasn't an entrapping question; it was a serious petition.

The Pharisees, as he was likely one of them, often argued over theological issues, and a popular dispute was about which commandment was the most important. Some thought the Golden Rule was the supreme law.

Of course, these days, we always agree on issues of our faith.

The scribe posed this question to Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

Without hesitation and with confidence, Jesus cited Deuteronomy 6:4, known as the Shema. Jesus then added to it the second commandment.

The first commandment is basicallyto Love God.

We are commanded to love,.....to love God.

A command to love..... doesn't resonate with our common perceptions on what love is about.

Image a couple dating, and she's getting cold feet about getting serious, and so the guy says, "Well,..... I command you to love me."

I don't think it would work,.... and besides, we are not real fond of "being commanded."

Nevertheless, we must contend with this command to love, because it is important.

And, it is important that we understand what it means and the means to implement it.

Deuteronomy 6 begins by stating the message is from God, and it is something that must be learned..... must be learned,.... and it must be taught to all generations. Remember this part--learning.

And, here are the reasons why--the incentives .

We need an incentive to obey a command, and just as with love, it begins with selfish reasons. From self the process begins.

The First reason is: to learn to fear God. As Proverbs 9:10 states, "The fear of God [Yahweh] is the beginning of wisdom."

We tend to cozy up to a loving, gracious God, and ignore the aspect of fear. Considering who God is and our relative power to God, we would be prudent..... "wise"... to retain an aspect of reverent fear.

The second incentive is to live longer--to survive the hazardous of life.
The third reason is that obedience will enhance our quality of life, too.

To be sure, until we learn a better way, our number priority is to take care of ourselves--known as self-preservation.
Even romantic love that reaches out to another, starts with the optimism that risking love will ultimately be beneficial to self.

We are given the reasons for obeying the command.
And, here is the Shema--Deut. 6:4

"Hear O Israel: Yahweh our God is one. You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might."

The name Shema derives from the opening Hebrew word--Hear.

Breaking this command down:
God is one suggests more than there is no other God. It also means complete--God is all, full, nothing is missing, and worthy of reverent fear.

Love: this love is how a loyal, devoted servant obeys his/her master.
He means total, dedicated submission.
Again, this kind of love is a reach for us....independent, democratic people. Still, don't reject it just yet.

In addition, we are to love God with our all.
In the old Hebrew context, the heart meant one's mind and will; the soul referred to the emotions, and "might" meant one's actions.
In other words, every part of our being is to love God.

The passage continues with instructions for learning this, in fact all of Deuteronomy is pedagogical in nature--for the purpose of teaching.

We are to keep this command in our thoughts; we are to recite this lesson to our children, and to talk about it all day long, over and over again.
Moreover, don't just say it, also write it out. Write Love the one God on your forehead....or on your hand, like you do with a phone number.
And, write it in places where you will see it throughout the day.

Devout Jews recite the Shema at least three times a day, and some orthodox Jews take the instructions to a literal extreme by wearing a little box with the words right on their forehead.

The point is to implant it in the brain through repetition in order for it to affect how we think, feel and act.

We are told this message is from God, and so it shows that God knows the power/ the influence of repetition-- of saying, of hearing, and of doing something over and over again.

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Our thoughts and feelings can be altered by hearing a message over and over again,..... just as a new routine can change how we think, too.

Advertisements depend on repeated expose for effectiveness.
And, if we hear something enough times, we'll accept it,... and cease to question the validity.

Governments and those with power to control the public message are keenly aware of the power of repetition. It's sometimes called brain washing..... or ... conditioning.

George Bush didn't need to prove that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. He only had to say it over and over again, and he did, and most people believed it, without question.

We are continually reminded that policies to protect the environment will hurt the economy and raise our taxes. Many times we've heard that the science on global warming is flawed.
And now, most consider those messages as truth.

Oil companies are reminding us how clean and beneficial they are to our well being and the economy.

Our own government uses propaganda to change how people think, and it's working.
For example, taxes are no longer measured by fairness and use; taxes are now a negative fee, like a fine.
Also, our government will spend nearly 100 million dollars on TV commercials and other ads to alter how we think.

Remembrance day is next Sunday, and we rarely hear the old mantra, "Never Again." It's been replaced, through repetition, with "Our soldiers fought for our freedom".... and "honour our troops."
And, that theme is now imbedded in the minds and thoughts of most people.

In addition, life patterns affect how we think, too.
There is influential power in ritual.

Likewise, changing behaviour will also change thoughts and attitudes.
For example, if we regularly mingle with people of different cultures we'll no longer notice there are people of different cultures.
People in cities who ride mass transit feel quite differently about others cultures, compared to those who live in the suburbs and drive to work.

Repetition of message and action changes how we think and feel, and..... there's a problem when those themes are destructive and lies.

Therefore, we need to hear and do, over and over again, what is valid, what is life giving, what brings healing/ salvation, and.... what brings us closer to God.

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This is part of the reason we do church--to counter balance the secular messages with messages from God.

We need church so as to hear and do God's messages of justice, peace, grace and love. We need to hear the first and second commands.

And, I'll get to the second in a moment.

Moreover, we must accept the power of repetition and use it for positive, uplifting reasons.

Repeat "I love you" to your partner and to anyone you value. Say it over and over again, each and every day. It works. The repetition will enhance and deepen the love.

We must tell our children over and over again that we are proud of them, that we love them for who they are, and we must teach and live the way of Christ, the way of peace, too..... over and over again, so that they will learn.

In the same manner, over and over again, we must not only think to ourselves, but we must tell our seniors that they are valued, respected, needed and appreciated.

Also, this may seem weird, but talk out loud to yourself. When you see an ad or a TV program that presents a message that is counter to the way of God / the way of Christ, then state it out loud, such as, "violence for any reason is wrong" or "A green economy will be stronger."

To be sure, we can talk to ourselves and intentionally change our patterns, too.

Just see what happens, if you repeat a positive, uplifting message to yourself ever morning, for example: "I am a wonderful and worthy of love, and with God's help, I will do well today." You'll be amazed how well it works.

The brain is programmable.

And, if we don't want to be a victim from negative messages or of our own limited resources and abilities, then we'd be prudent to consider "hearing" and learning the first and second commandment.

The Mark text uses the Greek word "Agape" for love.

I think we all know that agape love is transcendent love, a love that reaches out. It is beyond emotionally feelings. It is a complete love.

We are to love God for the sake of love, and that make take some practice to fully embrace it.

Repetition, repetition,..... and worship service and giving money to God, once a week, may not be enough repetition for us to really learn and understand....loving God.

So, I think that is why Jesus noted the second commandment:
Love your neighbour as yourself."

Setting self as a priority is assumed, and the second commandment is to take that emphasis / that devotion to self and place it on our neighbours.

And, the word Jesus used for neighbour means more than those nice people with live with. It suggests everyone.

Therefore, to grasp the loving devotion to God concept, we can start with loving all people, and that begins with the hard work / the discipline of intentionally saying and doing things that uplift and help others, over and over again.

This means sharing in words and doing actions that conform to the way of God as Jesus demonstrated, over and over again, such as regularly doing volunteer work for others or an intentional habit of helping others... or acting for justice and peace.

And, let us not forgot to use our words, too, over and over again.

This all begs the question: why bother... why all the work?
Why give love away when I need it???

Aside from the reasons stated in Deuteronomy, I think we really want to.

I think, deep down inside, we all have a divine spark of Agape love.

Call it God's Spirit..... or call it a yearning to transcend beyond the loneliness of our little world. We want to be loved,..... and to love.

Moreover, the journey to God / to agape love is learned. We CAN become the love.

The scribe was very impressed, even touched by Jesus' answer to his question, and confirmed what Jesus said.

Jesus replied to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God"

You are not far from the way of God.

Believing this is not far from being on the way--the journey of love.

Last Sunday's message was about the man who could see again and so joined Jesus "ON the Way."

The way / God's way / the way of Christ.....is dynamic; it is movement because love is a verb.

Believing is not enough. We must do to be.

One step, then another over and over again.....

Steps of love,..... steps of choice, disciplined, intentional steps towards and with the Love of God..... over and over again.

Salvation.....Jesus..... Love..... must be learned and lived, over and over again.