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## First Things First

Mark 12:28-34

A Duke Chapel sermon preached in Page Auditorium on November 1, 2015 by the Rev. Luke A. Powery

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On this All Saints Day, St. Mark wants us to keep first things first because it's so easy to lose sight of what is first, what is priority. The scribe asks Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" Sounds simple enough on the surface but this is like asking, "Which of the 613 commandments of the Torah is first?" Jesus doesn't close his eyes, point his finger, and say, "Eenie meanie miney mo." Rather coming straight from within his Jewish heritage and culture, his first word of response is "hear." "The first," Jesus says, "is, 'Hear, O Israel.'" He quotes the beginning of the Jewish daily prayer known as the *Shema* (from the Hebrew verb 'hear') from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. This prayer has been repeated since the second century B.C. Jesus draws on the saints, the teachers, of old to give an answer to the scribe. The *Shema* is the heart of Jewish faith and what's a bit surprising is that the first word in his answer to "Which commandment is the first of all?" is "hear." Which commandment? "Hear." This is the only other verb in his answer other than 'love.' But hear comes first, even before love. As the parable goes, human beings have two ears and one tongue because we are to listen twice as much as we speak.

President Franklin Roosevelt often endured long receiving lines at the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what was said. One day, during a reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We're proud of you. God bless you, sir." It was not until the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. The ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."

"Hear, O Israel." An ear-centered theology, not a word-centered one. An acoustical orientation for an ethical command and a life of faithfulness. "Faith comes by hearing" (Rom 10:17). "Hear, O Israel." "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you don't know from where it comes or where it goes" (John 3). Elizabeth tells the Virgin Mary, "For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy" (Luke 1). "Hear, O Israel." Theology is grounded in acoustemology. God speaks the Word of God in Jesus Christ and our response should be like the prophet Samuel, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3). Hear. Not speak or tweet, O Israel. Hear as the first step toward love. Hear as a part of the first commandment, as a posture of receptivity and humility. Hearing as a form of receiving. If we don't hear first, we might not be able to love and love fully. Hearing is the first act of faithfulness to God because if you don't hear, you won't receive the call from Jesus—"follow me" or "come and see." If our ears are closed we won't be keeping first things first. You won't hear the Word of God for you, today. "Which commandment is the first of all?" "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel.' Not feel nor think nor touch but hear. To be hard of hearing most likely means there will be a lack of loving or at least it will be hard to love. How are you to know who to love and how to love if you don't hear? If you don't hear rightly, you may not love rightly.

There was a San Francisco study in which teenage prostitutes were interviewed. They were asked: "Is there anything you needed most and couldn't get?" Their response, according to the reporter, was invariably preceded by tears. And it was a unanimous answer: "What I needed most was someone to listen to me. Someone who cared enough to listen to me." Our ethics are intertwined with our ears. Keep first things first. Hear.

And what are we supposed to hear? "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Not only is 'hear' the first word and first verb but we are to hear that God is first. God is one and number one. Hear God. The primacy of God is the premise for the commandment to love that follows. God is one, the unified source of all things, including love. God is love. Without God, there is no love. We can jump to what we are to do like Nike and "just do it" but if we neglect the source of our doing, it's in vain. Jesus calls us away from the ideology of "me first" and says, "God first."

Hear the Lord our God. This may be a challenge in an era of selfies. God first in everything. “In the beginning, God.” “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Theological roots to anthropological activity. Hear God first. That way we may truly understand what love is. That way we may truly understand what life is all about. The Lord is one because the Lord is love and love unifies. The unity of God calls us to be unified with God and each other through the bond of love. If love is lacking in our lives, we may know God like we think we do. Keep first things first. God first.

Love first. When Winston Churchill was seven or eight years old he was sent to boarding school. He was extremely homesick. He wrote letters home to his mother, begging her to come visit him and pleading with her to arrange for him to come home on weekends at times. But Churchill’s mother, according to Churchill’s biographer, never really had much time for her son because she was apparently far too wrapped up in her busy social life. When she received her son’s letters, begging for love and attention, she usually just tossed them aside. William Manchester, Churchill’s biographer, once made a very sad discovery. While looking through some boxes of Churchill’s old letters and diaries, he came across one of those letters in which young Winston begged his mother to come visit him at school. But not only had his mother ignored this plea, she had even used the backside of the letter as scratch paper on which she scribbled out a guest list for a party she was planning to throw the next month. This is an obvious failure in love and it can do damage to one’s entire life.

This is why it’s so important to keep God first. It’s an avenue of keeping love first. The Lord is one because love is communion and union. Love is unity. Love keeps God together. Love binds. By hearing God first, the Lord our God, we receive a clue about whom to love and how to love. Love naturally flows from God. You can talk about love without God but then love would not have the same lifeblood in it. Keeping first things first means being reminded that the heart of love is found at the very heart of the triune God in the eternal communion, the holy interpenetrating dance, of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Hear God first then act in love. “Which commandment is the first of all?” The first command is to love. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” The scribe asks for one commandment but Jesus appears to give two, one from Deuteronomy and one from Leviticus, because for Jesus the two can’t be separated. In other words,

*How can I say that I love the Lord  
Whom I never ever seen before  
And forget to say that I love the one  
That I walk beside each and every day  
How can I look upon your face  
And ignore God’s love  
You I must embrace  
You’re my brother;  
You’re my sister;  
And I love with the love of the Lord.*

(V. Michael McKay)

Loving God is expressed by loving neighbor. It’s the same love. Love is the *sine qua non* of the Christian life. Like the Beatles sing, “All you need is love.” Protestant theologian Karl Barth writes, “Wherever the Christian life...is good before God, the good thing about it is love.” They will know we are Christians by our love. They will not know we are Christians by our hate or judgment. St. Mark wants us to keep first things first. St. Augustine says, “Whoever...thinks that he [or she] understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build

the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all.” The rule of the Christian life is the rule of love. How we measure our life as Christians is by measuring the length and width and breadth and depth and height of our love.

Loving God encompasses our whole selves—your heart, your soul, your mind, and your strength. “Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.” It has a vertical and horizontal dimension because love is cruciform; it touches heaven and earth. Mother Teresa was right: “It’s not how much we do but how much love we put in the doing.” Christ gave his whole life for love. The saints of the church, even St. Mark, knew that love is a crown over our head, which for the rest of our lives we keep trying to grow tall enough to wear. We keep trying to love like Jesus. We keep trying to keep first things first. We keep trying to keep “love at the heart of every conversation with our children, every purchase we make, every dish we wash, every piece of garbage we recycle, every song we sing, every gathering we attend, every message we compose, every meal we partake, and every worship we attend, we fulfill God’s first command by embodying God’s love in every facet of our lives.”(Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm)

And remember when Jesus quotes Deuteronomy, the children of Israel are in a wilderness at that point in Deuteronomy. The *Shema*, the call to hear and love God, occurs in the wilderness, which means we are called to love God in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness. To sing when you are in sorrow, dance when you have a bad hip, laugh when you have a broken heart. Love even when your Savior is about to face death. Love when you don’t want to love. It’s a commitment. It’s a choice, not a fuzzy feeling. No matter what may be transpiring. No matter if it is required. Love.

“You shall love.” One writer sees it as more of a promise than a command (Frederick Buechner). “You shall love.” Even if we struggle with it now, we will love God at last for the last things tell us of “a [love] feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines” where there will be no more death, no more tears, no more mourning, crying, and pain. All things will be made new by love and you shall love. The last things should really be the first things every day, not just on All Saints Day. The beatific vision of God’s heaven as counterpoint to the perpetual violence on earth. As it is in heaven for all the saints, let it be so for us now. A feast rather than famine. Life instead of death. Love instead of hate. The last things as our eternal first at the wedding banquet of the Lord our God when God will be the first and last, the one alpha and omega of love. May we, as St. Mark teaches us today, keep first things first. On earth as it is in heaven. Amen.