

Edwards, Vanships, & Clerks
Deuteronomy 6:1-9 / Mark 12:28-34
Colebrook Congregational Church
November 1, 2015 / Communion Sunday / All Saints Sunday

Today's selection is the last of a series of arguments & discourses that Jesus had on the Tuesday before His crucifixion. It is different in tone from the antagonistic ones preceding it, suggesting that Jesus' teaching were being effective. In many such such interactions with the establishment in Jerusalem, there is an antagonistic undercurrent, which some scholars wonder if it is the result of the early antagonism between the early followers of Jesus and the rest of the community. This Gospel, though, does try to show that things were not quite so black and white, depicting Jesus in fellowship with worthy Pharisees and scribes.

It begins with a scribe who had observed the previous arguments and approached with a question. Others had approached Jesus with questions intending to entrap, to block efforts, or just to show off, but this man was there to learn.

He asked his question about which commandments are the greatest. Thing is that rabbis insist that there were no greater or lesser commandments. There are 613 commandments, none greater than another. One exception was an almost contemporary of Jesus, the Rabbi Hillel the Elder, who died around the time Jesus was a teenager. He was one of the most important figures in Jewish history, he was instrumental in the formation of the Talmud, which is to Rabbis what the Interpreter's Bible is to Pastors. He is also known for being the author of the Golden Rule: "What you would not have done to yourself, do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, and all the rest is commentary."

Other than that, there is nothing. Jesus is the first to combine the two greatest commandments, taken from Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18b, and used them as a summary for the whole Law.

The scribe then verifies that he understood Jesus. I find it interesting to note that the scribe that just met Jesus understood Him quicker than the Disciples who have been hanging out with him for the last six months.

Jesus' answer to the scribe is to take all of those 613 commandments and boil them down into two parts. Love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. So, we are to love God with everything, all the parts that make us up as a person, and it is to be active. Love is an action word. And then He raised the love of our neighbors to a similar status as loving God. They become the center from which all other duties radiate from.

There are many types of love. The word used here is *αγαπε*, the divine or holy love. Any of the loves become empty of power when they are not employed, they are made real by any employment in action, so things need to happen. Love is active. To love, you cannot just sit there and do nothing.

This concept has been central to Jonathan Edwards' Theology of Love called Disinterested Benevolence. To him, the best way to express your love for God is to engage in acts of *αγαπε* for people without the expectation of reward or any other ulterior motives. You help someone, address their needs, not for pay, nor for fame, but because it is the right thing to do. And incidentally, when you do help anyone, as Jesus tells us, we do the same thing for Him.

I took a Sunday off a couple weeks ago. I worked at a convention in Manchester, NH, repairing con-goers props & costumes, leading craft workshops, and being a chaplain when needed. There was a vendor there who was having a sale on anime dvds, and they had the second season of steam/dieselpunk series that Theresa & I enjoy, so I bought it. When I got home, I discovered that it only had part one in it, with the part two section of the box set being a cardboard place holder. So I would not forget, I just went out and bought the second part, and when it arrived, I decided to celebrate this by having a marathon of the complete series while I worked on this sermon.

It is called Last Exile, and it is about two young couriers, named Claus & Lavie, who fly their routes in vanships. Think two-seater airplanes that have been hot-rodded up, like old barnstormers or airshow or air race planes, with a huge engine in the front.

I hadn't seen it from the beginning for a long time, so during an early episode, while I was working out of the Interpreter's Bible, it dawned on me that the catalyst that started Claus & Lavie on their journey in the series, was a good illustration of what Jonathan Edwards was talking about.

All the air couriers in the local chapter of their union were participating in a big race...because that's what pilots do. Claus & Lavie have been working to raise money for parts for their vanship to do better in that race. As they go through the race, they are able to avoid crashing into obstacles and to pass everyone, including the favorites.

But in the final lap, they were in a canyon with the favorites, when out of a blind junction, another courier from somewhere else zooms in on his delivery, colliding with our heroes and the favorites in a three-way collision. The favorites lost power and set down and the other messenger crashed hard. Claus & Lavie are able to regain control and stay in the air, finding themselves to be the only vanships still airborne on the entire racetrack. They could have easily finished the race and taken the prize that they had been working so hard for. The only thing that had been on their minds. In fact that was what Lavie was screaming at Claus to do, but he wasn't listening to her. He was checking out those on the ground. The favorites signaled that they were okay, but Claus could see that the others were not okay. He insisted that they had to stop and help. Lavie sighed in resignation, accepting that they will lose yet another race, and all their work had been for naught.

They land and find the pilot, whom they've never met before, mortally wounded, with a young girl as a passenger. His assignment was marked with the highest priority, delivering a letter and the girl to a notorious privateer airship called the Silvana. The pilot described being chased by forces unknown, and they could hear them coming.

Clause offered to finish the pilot's assignment for him. They took the responsibility on themselves to do this. They threw the race that had been their primary goal, their house destroyed by the bad guys, their lives were endangered, chased out of their hometown, and then their vanship, their very

livelihood, was nearly destroyed. At many steps along the way, they could have turned the message and the girl over to their union and absolved themselves of all responsibilities. That would have been the easy choice. Protect yourself, avoid danger, put yourself first.

But they didn't. They decided to help out a man they didn't know and to protect a girl they just met. There was no promise of reward or notoriety with them doing that. I think that Jonathan Edwards would say that Claus, and eventually Lavie, exemplified that divine love, that *αγαπε*, that Jesus held up as the Greatest Commandment.

And do we live by that Greatest Commandment? The easiest way to check, in my opinion, is to reflect on how we treat retail or other customer service workers, people that you can get away with treating however you feel. One of my Barnes & Noble co-workers in the Cafe made a small mistake in a woman's latte order, and she responded by throwing a slice of Godiva triple chocolate cheesecake at her. One Christmas season, a lady in a very small voice told me that I wasn't hired because of my personality, and then continued on with more insults. I wanted to call her a coward for attacking someone who she knew couldn't respond or defend themselves. Working retail has shown me how little love for their neighbors some people have. While sharing stories of mean customers with my co-workers, I would say that everyone should work retail as their first job, to see things from the other side of the counter, and maybe that might make people think about how they treat their neighbors. To consider if they are treating their neighbors as they want to be treated.

At a time when other Rabbis taught that all commandments were created equal, Jesus selected two to be greater than the rest; and those two have become the central tenet of our faith. Love God. Love your neighbors. Only a God who is love would make love God's supreme demand. Finally, to close, I want to leave you with my favorite words of the Prophet Jeremiah, and I remind you that Jesus tells us that the "Law" can be summarized as *αγαπε*. Jeremiah prophesized: "I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

[Pause]

God of mercy and healing, You who hear the cries of those in need, receive these petitions of your people that all who are troubled may know peace, comfort, and courage.

We thank You for Your blessings, and for the lessons You teach us. We thank You for those You have sent to help us in our daily lives. We thank you for the generous donations that will help us help our neighbors in need.

We know we are not perfect, so we pray for the forgiveness of our transgressions. We pray for your guidance to live our lives in more loving ways.

We lift up the prayers of our hearts for those who are burdened, by troubles of mind, body, or spirit. We pray for their unburdening, we pray for their caregivers. We pray for those who are lost, so that they may find guidance. We pray for those who protect us, please keep them safe as they have kept us safe. And we pray that you help us to be instruments of your divine love.

We are reminded of all in world who need our prayers. We pray for the families of the victims of violence. We pray for the refugees around the world, both home & abroad, for victims of natural disasters, please see them to safer places, and we give thanks to those who provide them shelter. We pray for those who are enduring drought & famine. We pray for all to have a safe place.

We especially pray for:

Redeeming Sustainer, visit Your people and pour out Your strength and courage upon us, that we may hurry to make You welcome not only in our concern for others, but by serving them generously and faithfully in Your name. Amen.

Prayer of Remembrance

Source of all being, beginning and end, we praise you for those who have served you faithfully. For the sake of Jesus Christ, replenish our hope in your eternal kingdom, that we may have life in all its fullness, unfettered by the fear of death. Amen.

Mark 12:28-34

12:28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

12:29 Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one;

12:30 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.'

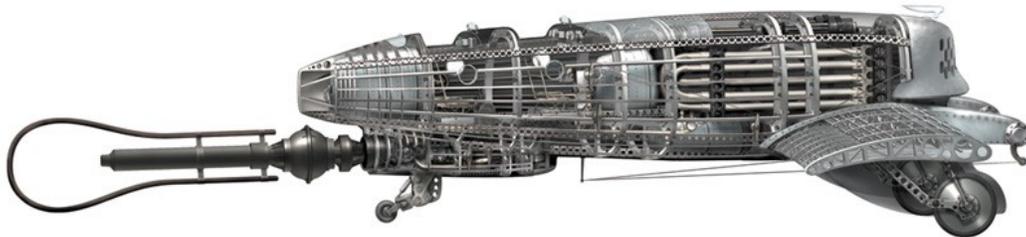
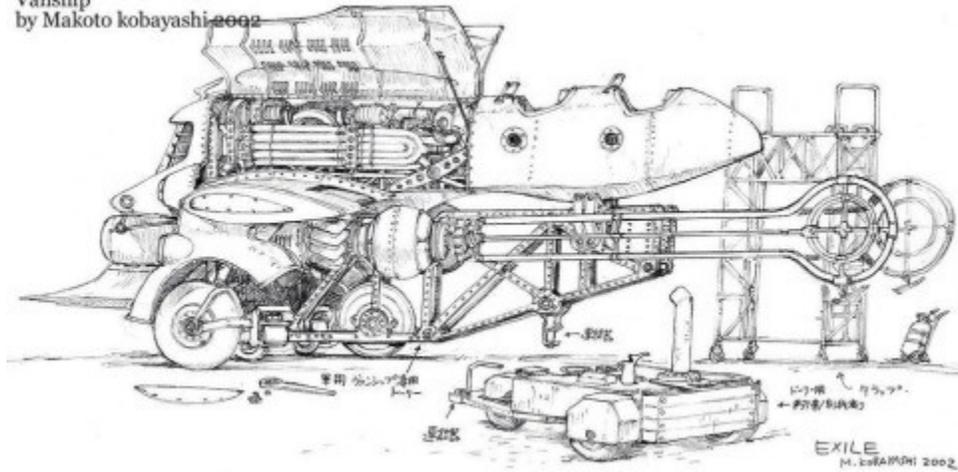
12:31 The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

12:32 Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other';

12:33 and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' --this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

12:34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that no one dared to ask him any question.

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Vanship
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