

Back to the Basics
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Mark 12:28-34

If you feel like you're busier than ever, you're not alone!

There is a myth circulating around that suddenly we all have extra time on our hands and this time is basically a staycation where we spend our days catching up on hobbies, binging Netflix, and learning new languages to stave off the boredom.

For the first few days of our social distancing experiment I thought I was doing it all wrong because I had LESS free time than normal. I was stressed to the max with all there was to be done. Then I started to talk to other people and realized I'm not alone.

People working from home for the first time are trying to learn new ways of doing their job: they are learning new apps, new communications, and leaning into constant creativity which takes a lot more mental effort than doing business as usual.

People who have always worked from home are trying to be patient with fumbling coworkers and disrupted workflows.

People who still go into work are dealing with different guidelines and safety practices, cranky customers, and the uncertainty of knowing how long their job will last.

People who are retired have had their daily schedules uprooted. They are worried about friends but unable to visit with them in person. They are worried that their volunteer work has been halted. They are worried about grandkids but are unable to swoop in and babysit them. They are worried about their own parents in retirement homes but are unable to visit - and are finding that checking in via phone multiple times a day is necessary but more time consuming than ever.

And yet, a whole generation of people who have been teased by their younger friends and family for not adapting to technology are suddenly leading video conference calls, livestreaming concerts and worship services, and spending more time online in one week than they likely have all year.

Now, all of that is really impressive, but it certainly doesn't sound like a staycation!

Parents who are suddenly home with kids are trying to learn how to be teachers and sports coaches and artists and scientists and chefs and school counselors. The impossible balance of working from home and teacher-parenting makes them want to pull their hair out – especially if they are already professional educators trying to come up with plans for distance learning while wrangling their own kids!

Parents who are still going in to work – many of our first responders, for example - are coming home to anxious families whose routines have been uprooted and need new kinds of care, meaning they are hustling all day and hustling all night.

Parents who have always stayed home with their kids are sending their frazzled friends tips, filling in the supportive gaps where library programs and playdates and field trips once were.

It's probably safe to say that most parents stuck at home don't really feel like they are on a staycation right now!

As I've spent time this week contemplating all these ways so many of us have been forced to adapt, I have found myself craving the more simple things in life. Because the world, all of the sudden, seems really complicated. How about you?

Well, friends, we're lucky because the narrative lectionary takes us back to the basics today. And it's a word that I need to hear. Maybe you do too.

A version of today's text appears in one form or another in Matthew, Mark and Luke. But I like this one best because it's the only one in which his adversary becomes one of Jesus' followers.

We know that there were people trying to challenge and trick Jesus all the time, people like the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, the chief priests, the scribes. Pretty much anyone who held power in the dominant structure, or who didn't like Jesus or his message, tried to catch him in a gotcha moment. If they could only cause him to misspeak or mess up, it might discredit him in front of his disciples. Maybe if they were lucky, they could even disband the movement!

But not today. Today, in this text, the scribe doesn't ask Jesus a question to trick him or challenge him. No, as it turns out, he's genuinely intrigued and wants to know more. This anonymous scribe overheard Jesus disputing with another scribe, and he thought that he responded well, and so he asked him his question.

After Jesus tells him the commandment: to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself, he has this beautiful, affirmative moment with the scribe.

Part of why Jesus' basic message, to love God and to love neighbor as yourself is so threatening, is because he puts these two commandments above the law, above ritual and above sacrifice.

Because guess who controlled those practices Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Herodians, the chief priests, the scribes. It's like, all this time, they had behaved like the gatekeepers to God, to the Kingdom of Heaven. Being the ones who controlled the burnt offerings and sacrifices, they were the intermediaries between the faithful people and God.

But then Jesus comes along, opens those gates wide open and says come, all have access to God and to unconditional love and forgiveness. All you have to do is love God with every part of your being, and love your fellow human beings and love yourself.

And you'll notice that he doesn't tell his followers not to follow the other commandments, or not to keep the purity laws or to offer sacrifices. He simply says, *'this is the greatest commandment.'*

So, it's official. Love is the cornerstone – the basic building block - of our faith. It is the thing upon which all others must rest. And you can't faithfully worship God or follow God's other commandments, if you don't first love God and love all people. This week, loving other people means staying home. Flattening the curve. Sharing resources with your neighbor at a safe, 6 foot distance.

What might it look like next week? A month from now? We don't know yet.

I wish I did. Because there is comfort when things are black and white, when we know what we can and can't do. And patience can run in short supply. This loving our neighbor stuff can be nuanced and complicated.

Remember that when Jesus told his people to love their neighbor as themselves, he didn't say it with an asterisk defining who that may be. To literally be someone's neighbor, means to have them close to you, either physically or emotionally. I have a hunch, in these times, he'd advise us to draw the circle wide, bring everyone in, and remember that we belong to each other. We are all interwoven, all part of humanity, we are as close to each other as we can safely get.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed right now. We all feel it. But we move forward, embracing the best of who we are and doing so together.

Please be gentle with yourselves. Know that if you feel like you are busier than ever, or you're having a hard time finding the "quiet evenings" you remember fondly from a week and a half ago, you are not alone. We're all in this together.

Love is messy and complicated and it often doesn't have clear outcomes, but I know that when I act out of love, I never regret my actions or my decisions.

We're all struggling right now with how to be people of faith in ways we haven't before. As long as we stick together, we can figure this out. That scribe had a change of heart, turning away from power and judgment, and towards love above all else. We can have a change of heart too, moving from fear to connection, from division to unity.

May it be so, and may it be soon, Amen.