

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Psalm 119:1-8

Hebrews 9:11-14

Mark 12:28-34

Sermon for November 3, 2024

THE CUB SCOUT MANUAL

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Summary: First things first.

The aptly-named Hell's Canyon is a ten-mile wide canyon located along the border of eastern Oregon and western Idaho. It was carved by the waters of the Snake River which flows more than a mile below the mountain rims on either side, and includes hundreds of thousands of acres of wilderness, most of which even today is inaccessible by road, although there are hiking and horse trails that connect a few isolated ranches and homesteads where hardy individuals who prefer the primitive lifestyle of the old days still live.

Many years ago, when I was very much younger and very slightly more foolish than I am today, I decided that I would try to hike through it alone. I had a pup tent and a sleeping bag, and having provisioned myself with a big supply of trail mix and beef jerky and salt pork, I hitchhiked as far as the road could go, and then, waving a jaunty farewell to civilization, I set out on my great adventure.

One morning several days later, now covered with mosquito bites and various rashes, my feet swollen and bleeding, having had several unnerving encounters with rattlesnakes and skunks, my salt pork gone bad and most of my jerky and trail mix already consumed, I was sitting miserably outside my tent when, by the grace of God, one of those hardy back-country ranchers came riding down the trail I was on, leading a pack horse, on his way to pick up some supplies from a little town back on the road. With what I am sure was great amusement, he offered to let me ride back with him on the back of the pack horse, although it would mean riding on a wooden saddle. With what little sense I had left, I humbly accepted his offer;

and I am to this day eternally grateful to that kind Samaritan, although bouncing along on a wooden saddle for ten or twelve hours is an experience I would never wish on my worst enemy. Even now, fifty years later, I'm not sure I have fully recovered.

Why did my great adventure, so full of eagerness and self-confidence, come to so ignominious an end? The answer is simple. Because I tried to be Davy Crockett without ever having even been a Cub Scout.

Which brings us to our gospel reading for today.

Mark 12:28-34

The event described in this selection was obviously considered a very important one in the early Christian movement, because Matthew, Mark and Luke all record it, although with some small variations. Its central element is, of course, when Jesus cites two passages from the Old Testament: the first from Deuteronomy - ... *you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength* - and the second from Leviticus - *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*. And then, in all three accounts, Jesus makes the extraordinary leap, found nowhere in the Old Testament, of telling us that these two commandments are somehow intimately related.

This morning, I'd like us to think about how they're related.

Think for a moment about the first: You shall love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. What does that even mean? How can anyone understand that, forget about following the instruction. I love my wife in one way and to a certain degree, my parents in another way and to a certain degree, my country, my church, my friends. I love pasta. I love to read. I love to study the Bible. So I sort of know what love is. But I can't imagine how love - as I have any experience of it - would occupy my whole being, body and soul and mind, especially when it's supposed to be directed towards a, infinite, invisible, eternal being that I've never met? And just saying "Oh but this is different. This is the love of God," doesn't help. Or at least it doesn't help me, whatever it may do for others.

And I think that where's Jesus' instruction comes in. Remember, Jesus came to do two things for us that we could never do for ourselves. The first is to erase the debt of our sins; and the second is to show us the way to God. I think that second is what he's engaged in in our reading for today: Whatever it might mean to love God with all our being, he's showing us how we can realistically begin the journey

towards that distant destination. He's showing us, in my homely analogy how do be a Cub Scout on our way to being Davy Crockett someday.

And how is that? Well, here's where it becomes really practical. You'll notice Jesus doesn't just say: Love your neighbors. As I've had any experience of love, I'm not sure I could ever love my neighbor, Ed, the way I love my parents, or even pasta, for that matter.

What does Jesus say? He says, Love your neighbors the way you love yourself. And what that must boil down to, if it's to be practical advice, since we can't just adjust our emotions at will, is that we show love to your neighbors the way we show love to ourselves. And that leads us, of course, to think about this question: How do I show my love for myself?

Without claiming that it's an exhaustive list, this morning I'm going to mention three ways in which at least most of us love ourselves. And that short list will provide us with at least the beginnings of a Cub Scout manual in coming to love God.

First, we show our self-love by applauding ourselves.

You will have noticed that most people, most of the time, when they talk about themselves, tend to cast themselves in a very good light, tend to talk about the things they accomplished the day, or the good they did for someone. Very seldom do you find people who are eager to communicate how they hurt somebody else's feeling the day before, or messed up some project, or failed to go the extra mile for somebody because they were just too tired.

Let me pause here to be clear about something. There's nothing necessarily wrong about the way we tend to portray our better selves in public: it's just human nature. And Jesus doesn't say: Stop loving yourselves. He says, extend **that** love you have for yourself to others. Examine how you love yourself, and then, when it's available, extend **that** attitude towards **them**.

So the practical instruction would be, focus on the good qualities and actions of your neighbors, of those who cross your path. And when you get a chance, publicize them, either to their face or to others or to both. Put them in the best light you can, just as you do for yourself.

And how else to we love ourselves?

Another pretty obvious candidate, at least for many of us, is the extent to which we feel sorry for ourselves. How much time do we spend dwelling on our various misfortunes, on the diseases and injuries we've suffered, on the losses we've experienced? How often do we regret the hands we were dealt with which to play the game of life? With what poignancy do we dwell on the mistakes we've made in our lives, on the wrong turns we've taken, on the opportunities we missed, on how we've squandered our talents, our advantages and our time?

Again, this isn't meant in criticism of the kind of creatures we are: it's simply to ask us to **acknowledge** the kinds of self-sympathetic creatures we are, and then to suggest that we attempt to extend that self-pity to others, by extending to them our sympathy, rather than our condemnation: to love others, as we love ourselves.

Which brings us to perhaps the simplest and most-straightforward way we can make practical application to our Lord's instruction.

When we truly think about the ways we love ourselves, perhaps nothing stands out more clearly than the ways in which we forgive ourselves.

We notice that the thoughts and activities **we** engage in, which we would find unworthy or even deplorable or even inexcusable in others, appear in an entirely different light when we are the source. We notice how readily excuses come to mind – I was just too tired to help, I just wasn't thinking, I'd had such a rough day, that person actually deserved it!, and so on and so on.

When it is our own behavior and attitudes that are before the court, we all become world class defense attorneys, establishing our own innocence beyond any shadow of a doubt or, in the worst possible scenario, pleading for mercy on the basis of mitigating circumstances.

I could go on with the analogy, but I hope the point is clear, and I hope it's one with which we all identify, at least to some degree.

When Jesus asks us to love others as we do ourselves, he's asking us to willfully extend the same generosity towards them that we do simply by human nature towards ourselves.

Is that the same as loving the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind? No, none of us except the occasional saint is anywhere near that lofty goal. But what it is is the Cub Scout manual. What it is is the mustard seed, the bit of leaven, that the spirit of Christ in you can use, and

nourish, and cultivate until it becomes the great plant that can shelter others, until it turns into the abundant bread of Christ's own life, the bread that can feed the whole world, the bread that can even feed, and satisfy, our loving and gracious God, because it has been prepared with a love like God's own.

And so, loving and gracious God, our prayer for today is that you keep us alert to possibilities in our small everyday lives, not to love you with all our heart and all our mind – for that for most of us is still too daunting a responsibility – but to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, with kindness and sympathy and mercy and generosity. In a word, Father, we pray that you enlighten us to love others with the same forgiveness with which we love ourselves, for that is how Christ Himself loves each one of us, and it is in His name we pray.