

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer
November 1, 2009
Mark 12: 28-34
Giving our Whole Selves

I'll begin with a story: "A few years ago, a radio station ran a contest. Disc jockeys invited their listeners to tune in their clock radios. "Just for fun", they said, "when you wake up to the sound of FM-106, call and tell us the first words you spoke when you rolled out of bed. If you're the third caller, you'll win \$106. It didn't take long for the contest to grow in enthusiasm. the first morning, a buoyant disc jockey said, "Caller number three, what id you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?" A groggy voice said, 'Do I smell coffee burning?" Another day, a sleepy clerical worker said, "Oh no, I'm late for work". Somebody else said her first words were, "Honey, did it put out the dog last night?" A muffled curse was immediately heard in the background, and then a man was heard to say, "No, you didn't". It was a funny contest and drew a considerable audience. One morning, however, the third caller said something unusual. The station phone rang, "Good morning, this is FM-106. You're on the air. What did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?" A voice with a Bronx accent replied, "You want to know my first words in the morning?" The bubbly DJ said, "Yes, sir! Tell us what you said". The Bronx voice responded, 'Shema, Israel...Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might". There was a moment of embarrassed silence. Then the radio announcer said, "Sorry, wrong number", and cut to a commercial. (from William G. Carter's sermon "What to Say When You Roll Out of Bed", www.sermons.com).

The radio announcer was embarrassed. The man who called in wasn't. He was a faithful Jew, doing what faithful Jews worldwide do every morning, and every evening, and whenever they leave and enter their homes --- he was reciting the ancient words of Deuteronomy, words that Jesus knew by heart, words that Jesus' audience also knew by heart, words that Moses spoke to the Hebrew people after receiving God's law on Mount Sinai. The words come from the sixth chapter – and I'll read them now: "Now this is the commandment – the statutes and the ordinances – that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you and children and your children's children may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life...Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates".

To love God with heart, soul, and strength – and then as Jesus expands it, with mind --- is to love God with our whole selves. It is to not compartmentalize our lives with God --- God gets this part of me, and my family gets this part, and my job gets this part, and the church gets this part. We are to love God with all our being, and in that loving, we are to give ourselves fully to God.

Another preacher describes it as “no holding back”. Loving and giving God our all in all. He talks about loving God with all our soul like this: “It really means “love the Lord your God with whatever makes you YOU. Are you happy-go-lucky, outgoing, gregarious, the life of the party? Fine. Then let your ebullience be reflected in the way you serve God. Are you quiet, introspective, much more comfortable out of the limelight than in it? Wonderful. Then let your quiet stability be put to work in the name of the Lord. The message is that there is no such thing as cookie-cutter discipleship. One size does NOT fit all. Love the Lord your God with all YOUR soul. And no holding back” (David E. Leininger, “No Holding Back”, www.sermons.com).

Before we look at church budgets, or talk more about how to reduce expenses, or come up with ways to raise more money, we need to hear again the message that stewardship is a spiritual matter more than a money matter. It really is. When we are right with God --- when we have our lives in order with God --- when we are living out of that relationship – the other stuff will follow. Giving our money, or giving our time, or giving our skills, won’t be seen as an outward obligation but as a response to an inward commitment. Giving our money will be just one more way we express our love for God – through the way we share what we have been given. Christian stewardship is a way of life and a way of giving that includes every aspect of our lives. Do we hold back in our devotion to God? Do we try to save too much for ourselves --- or do we give our selves wholly and fully?

I attended a spiritual retreat a number of years ago that used the image of our life as a house. The question asked was whether all of the rooms of our house are open to God – or do we have some rooms that we have kept locked and inaccessible? Are there parts of our lives that we keep private and secret, parts we don’t want to share with God? Are there messy closets we don’t want God to see? Are there rooms of our lives marked, “private. Do not enter.”

To love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love our neighbor as ourselves pretty much covers all aspects, or rooms of our lives – our thinking, our loving, our decision-making, our relationships, our faith, our actions, our will, our loyalties, our bodies, our feelings, our commitments, our choices, our religious devotion and practices, our priorities. All of life is included. To give our whole selves to God is to give our whole life to loving and serving God. And such love and service isn’t just for the Saints with a capital S, you know. It isn’t only the big-name Christians who have given their lives to God. All of us are called to practice the kind of faith that gives fully – the kind of faith that gives our whole selves. So that God and neighbor come before one’s own self. So that all of life is lived to the glory of God – not just our outward actions but also our inward feelings and thoughts and commitments. And not just our

inward thoughts and feelings and commitments, but also our outward actions. not just the public rooms of our life's house, but also the private. Even the messy rooms we might be embarrassed about, because God's love can clean them up if we give them over to God and let God's love into them.

Do you love God with all that you are and all that you have?

There's a funny bumper sticker I've seen on cars that reads, "What if the Hokey-Pokey **is** what it's all about?" You know --- that sort of silly dance where you put your right leg in, -- and then your left leg --- and your right hand, and your left hand, and your right hip, and your left hip --- and then finally how does the dance end? 'You put your whole self in – you put your whole self out – you put your whole self in and you shake it all about – you do the hokey-pokey and you turn yourself around, that's what it's all about!'.

Well you know, when it comes to our lives as people of faith, putting our whole self into it really is what it's all about. Loving and living and giving with our whole selves --- there's where it all starts, that's where it all ends.

Preaching professor Tom Troeger offers us this poem for today:

"If all you want, Lord, is my heart,
 my heart is yours alone –
 providing I may set apart
 my mind to be my own.
 If all your want, Lord, is my mind,
 my mind belongs to you,
 but let my heart remain inclined
 to do what it would do.
 If heart and mind would both suffice,
 while I kept strength and soul,
 at least I would not sacrifice
 completely my control.
 But since, O God, you want them all
 to shape with our own hand,
 I pray for grace to heed your call
 to live your first command".

May we all have such grace –to love God with our whole selves --- and to hold nothing back. Amen.

