

***Gospel in One Word***

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Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

**Deuteronomy 6:1-9**

6:1 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,

6:2 so that you and your children and your children's children, may fear the LORD your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long.

6:3 Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

6:5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

6:6 Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

6:7 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.

6:8 Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead,

6:9 and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

**Mark 12:28-34**

12:28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus 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 Jesus, "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 the scribe answered wisely, he said to him, "**You are not far from the kingdom of God.**" After that no one dared to ask Jesus any question.

Prayer: Now may the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

## Communion Meditation

Last week we heard the news of shots ringing out in a Sanctuary killing eleven<sup>1</sup>. They were people of faith gathered to read the Scripture, to pray, to bless God and one another. Emails went out Monday about a vigil at the Jewish Temple in Greenville and Shabbat services in Anderson this last Friday...and most interestingly, they came to me from Sylvia, our friend at the Islamic Society in Pendleton. We shared our grief in notes- little bits of electronic data which reminds us that we are more connected and alike than we are different.

On Tuesday I had a call from Peter Cohen, the Jewish student group advisor at Clemson. I expressed my deep sorrow for the Jewish community near and far, to which he replied, "I am praying for the whole human family." He said rather than drive to Greenville, that afternoon the students would gather in his office to pray--- a little gathering. Gathering- that is what the word synagogue means- literally "a meeting place," "bringing together." This is what has kept the people of God for thousands of years.

Today we gather, too, our synagogue. It is not the building. It is the people gathered. I am the church, you are the church....and where two or more of us are gathered, God is in our midst.

We gather to remember our Lord and to be re-membered- put back together, formed and re-formed into the people of God. We meet Him here at this Table and in this written Word. We meet Him here in the faces of strangers and friends. We gather to remember, lest we forget the God of the Universe, the hope of humanity, and the love that we are commanded to practice. I almost said "called to Practice, but Jesus answers the scribe's query, "What is the most important "commandment?" Commanded not called. There is no room for misinterpretation. No could, should, but a SHALL. You shall love the Lord....and your neighbor as yourself. Do you hear the difference? Not called to love, but commanded. Hear it?

Sometimes it is so hard to hear. Frederick Beuchner writes this:

*Hear, O Israel! Only more often than not we hear nothing because we live in a wilderness where more often than not there is nothing of God to hear.  
And of course it was in just such a wilderness that the great words of Moses were trumpeted forth in the first place,  
and the people who first heard them were in the wilderness with him,  
as wandering and lost as we are,  
with nothing to keep them going but the hope of a Promised Land,  
which much of the time seemed a promise so remote and improbable that even the bondage they had left behind them in Egypt looked hopeful by comparison.  
To be commanded to love God at all, let alone in the wilderness,  
is like being commanded to be well when we are sick,*

*to sing for joy when we are dying of thirst, to run when our legs are broken.*

*But this is the great and first commandment nonetheless.*

*Even in the wilderness—especially in the wilderness—you shall love him.<sup>ii</sup>*

Maybe you have been in a wilderness lately. Or perhaps someone you love is suffering beyond any imaginings, and you are walking with him or her. In the wilderness we can be parched and hungry and lonely and weary. Sometimes it is all we can do to put one foot in front of another. I spoke with someone recently going through a wilderness, and I congratulated her. "Today you got out of bed. You dressed and you took care of your child. That is no small victory. Get through this hour and then this day. God will sustain us."

Picturing Peter Cohen and our Jewish students gathering on Clemson's campus to mourn and pray, I thought of this scene from James Carroll's novel *The Cloister*.<sup>iii</sup> Part of the story takes place in a Jewish concentration camp in France during the WWII occupation. A Jewish woman Rachel and her father, Saul Vedette, a scholar, are interred there. One of the ways they stay alive, mentally and spiritually, is by gathering in secret. A closet becomes their Sunday morning Beit Midrash, house of study. Saul becomes the de facto rabbi. The little band includes a Paris architect, a clerk from Marseille, a garment merchant, a lawyer from Hungary, a teacher, a former member of the National Assembly, and a Pole whose teeth had been knocked out by an incident he refused to discuss.

They begin to debate sin and suffering. They wonder aloud, is this suffering so God can correct us? How is this love? The clerk declared hotly, "the Lord is gone!" turning fiercely to Saul Vedette, "You, Rabbi, tell us! Where is the Lord in this?"

Saul eventually responds with calm and tranquility, "The Lord's silence is not His absence....These are the great questions. We were put here to ask them----not to answer them."

He goes on to say that it is not the sin of his people that God sees, it is their suffering. He finds it in Moses quoting, "And the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows. And I am come down to deliver them out of the land of the Egyptians,...unto a land flowing with milk and honey."

The men on the other side continue to argue for the holocaust being God's punishment for sin. Saul replies, "The Lord knows the sorrow of His people. And what happens then?"

"When?"

"after Egypt.

"Forty years of exile."

And where was the Lord?"

The garment merchant spoke up, "The LORD went with them."

"And where was the LORD when Babylon destroyed the Temple and carried the people off to captivity?"

"With them," the merchant said.

"And after Rome destroyed the Temple and drove our fathers off?"

"With them."

...Finally Saul Vedette said, "And this presence of His, with the people in exile and captivity- did the people see it? Or hear it? What do you think?"

Their conversation continues about God' silence....until...the toothless Pole speaks up and says "No! No!"...shaking his fist at Saul Vedette, and nearly shouting, "We must speak by saying, 'No!'"

Someone said, "Ben Joseph sit, sit- they will hear us..."

"Let them hear! My children are gone! Carried to their deaths!"

"We do not know that---"

"Of course we know it! Do not speak to me of holding fast. You are fools, all of you! With your talk of [rabbis] Ramban and Rashi and Moses and the Lord! Who cares? Who cares?"

Vedette stood, drawing close to the toothless man. He opened his arms, as if asking permission. He wrapped him with a stout embrace. The man fell against him, and his shoulders began to move. "We care," Vedette said. He repeated softly, "We care."

Eventually the others stood all around in a circle ... in a silence that was not absence. Finally, Rachel's father, Saul Vedette, said quietly, "'Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba.' 'Exalted and hallowed be God's great name in the world which God created.'" They were the words of the Jewish mourner's prayer the *Kaddish*, prayed daily in the mourning period.

Silence is not absence.

And in that closet in a concentration camp, the members experienced God's presence. Even and especially in the wilderness and the chaos of life, God is with us, in us, and through us. And the most important command is love.

*Hear, O Israel*- sometimes there is so much noise it is hard to hear. People are shouting everywhere. We must go to a prayer closet, a sanctuary, take a drive with the music off, and listen to silence. We must go out into a field where we can gaze at stars and listen. We must climb to the top of Lookout and scan the valley below, the heavens above, and smell the distant campfire. Listen...

This is what Deuteronomy and Jesus' words do for us. They give us perspective and distance. They take us up to 30,000 feet. Over the din and noise, we are to hear this above all else-

**6:4 Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.**

**6:5 You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.**

And Jesus adds the second, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." Loving God, we love others. And in loving others, we love God. It is the great reciprocal Promise. Beuchner writes,

*The final secret, I think, is this: that the words "You shall love the Lord your God" become in the end, less a command than a promise.*

***And the promise is that, yes, on the weary feet of faith and the fragile wings of hope, we will come to love him at last as from the first he has loved us—loved us even in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness, because he has been in the wilderness with us.***

*He has been in the wilderness for us.* (emphasis mine)

*He has been acquainted with our grief.*

*And, loving him, we will come at last to love each other too so that, in the end, the name taped on every door will be the name of the one we love.<sup>iv</sup>*

The scribe understands. Perhaps that is why Jesus tells him,  
"You are not far from the kingdom of God."

It is the greatest commandment and promise because to love God and love neighbor is how we experience salvation....and the kingdom of God comes near.

This is the good news of the gospel. And the gospel in one word is love.

Do you believe it?

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<sup>i</sup> Tree of Life Congregation in Pittsburgh, PA was attacked on Saturday, October 27 by a gunman.

<sup>ii</sup> Beuchner, Frederick. *Secrets in the Dark; a Life in Sermons* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), 101.

<sup>iii</sup> Carroll, James, *The Cloister*. (New York: Random House, 2017), pp. 229-234.

<sup>iv</sup> Beuchner, pp. 103-104.