

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – **November 1, 2009**

Ruth 1: 1-18; Psalm 146; **Mark 12: 28-34**

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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?"

Jesus answered, "The first is, '*Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.*' The second is this, '*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*' There is no other commandment greater than these."

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*'; 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."

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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## **DEFINING THE CORE**

I use my computer nearly every day. I keep my appointment calendar and my address book on it, write letters, communicate with people for the church and personal reasons, compose sermons, read articles, play games – you name it. The computer is an important part of everyday life for me yet I confess that I don't really understand much about it. Perhaps you are the same way – it is a tool and if something goes wrong I am more likely to call on one of my resident experts than to attempt anything on my own.

I know just the basics – enough to get the help I need, when I need it. I know the operating system of my computer for example. It is a Windows machine. Some of you may have the same system. Will and Hope Stenton have a Mac – a different operating system. The operating system is kind of the hub of how the computer works. No matter how great the word processing program you have – even if it is the latest and greatest on the market – if your operating system doesn't connect with it, the program won't run. The operating system is key to making everything else work.

When Tristan got his laptop a year and a half ago, he chose a dual platform computer. He is able to switch back and forth between a Windows operating system, familiar to most of us, and Ubuntu. Ubuntu is a computer operating system based on Linux. It provides an up-to-date, stable operating system for the average user, with a strong focus on usability and ease of installation.

Ubuntu is composed of multiple software packages of which the vast majority is distributed under a free software license (also known as open source) – users are free to run, copy, distribute, study, change, develop and improve the software. The system focuses on usability

and security, emphasizing accessibility and internationalization to reach as many people as possible.

Ubuntu – the computer operating system – is named after a South African ethical ideology that stresses humanity towards others. The word comes from the Bantu languages spoken in southern Africa and describes a particular worldview – an operating system if you will – which translates roughly as *I am because you are*. It means that individuals need other people for fulfillment – a person is only a person through their relationship with others.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu has defined ubuntu in the following way:

*My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours. ...there is a common bond between people – and when one person's circumstances improve, everyone gains and if one person is tortured or oppressed, everyone is diminished.*

*Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can't exist as a human being in isolation. It speaks about our interconnectedness. You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality – Ubuntu – you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as just individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world. When you do well, it spreads out; it is for the whole of humanity.*

Mr. Tutu's identification with ubuntu has given rise to the idea of "ubuntu theology" – where ethical responsibility comes with a shared identity. If someone is hungry, the ubuntu response is that we're all collectively responsible. There is a spiritual as well as practical dimension to this – with ubuntu reflecting the idea that we're part of a long chain of human experience, connecting us to previous and future generations.

You may wonder what all of this has to do with the price of tea in China (as my mother used to say) or with anything in the scripture texts that Marianne read for us this morning. We take our theology – our understanding of God and how God intends us to live in this divine creation – from Biblical teaching rather than from African philosophies and computer technologies. Jesus' teaching on the great commandment is connected both to the concept of operating systems and "ubuntu theology". Let me explain...

At the time of Jesus and throughout the first century there was likely not a dramatic distinction between the community of believers for whom Mark writes his gospel and the Jewish community. The development of two separate religions – Judaism and Christianity – was to come later. Mark's community still thought of itself as a Jewish sect. The tension addressed in the gospel is over different expressions of Judaism – how to correctly follow the Torah (the law), whether Jesus was God's agent to bring transformation, and who should be included in the community. Issues not dissimilar to those that cause tension among Christian communities today.

The question of *which commandment is first of all* is typical of issues that rabbis would have discussed. We don't need to assume that all those who asked searching questions of Jesus were trying to trap him. Some may be seeking clarification of things that puzzle them or trying to explore Jesus' insights into the Law. It is just as likely that the scribe is asking,

not which commandment is first of many, but rather which commandment defines the core of Torah law – stands at its center – summarizes it. Is there one law that is the key to all the laws? Is there "some basic principle from which the whole law can be derived?"

Jesus had shown a new freedom in his attitude to the law to the extent that some believed he was trying to overturn it. However, Jesus came to fulfil the law and to bring people back to a freshness in their observance of it that had been lost.

And so, the scribe who comes to Jesus seems genuinely to have been seeking his advice. Jesus listens to the question, pauses for a moment and then gives his response. He doesn't reply with the 613 laws in some kind of rank order. He doesn't indicate that the 365 prohibitions in the law are more or less important than the 248 positive commands. Instead, Jesus gives an answer that is truly the heart of Judaism and becomes the heart of our faith also. *'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.'* (from Deuteronomy) and *'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* (from Leviticus)

Yes! That's it – loving God is the root of everything! Love of God issues in love of others – to love others is to demonstrate love for God. The two are inseparably joined.

According to the famous Jewish religious leader, Hillel – considered a great sage and scholar in Jerusalem during the forty years from 30 BCE to 10 CE – *That which is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary.*

We are not designed by God to function in isolation. We are designed by God for community. The concept of Ubuntu says that we are bound to one another – connected in the good we do as well as in the evil we fail to oppose. Asian theologian, Andrew Sung Park, affirms that *no one is fully saved until all are saved. Salvation is wholeness, and no one can actualize wholeness by him or herself.*

The symbol of our salvation – the cross of Christ – shows simply and wonderfully this double command at the foundation of what Jesus teaches. The vertical board points us to the one and only God whom we are to love with our entire being. The horizontal axis stretches out like arms to embrace our neighbours – those we are to love generously. This is who we are and how we are to function in the world. This is the Bible summarized in two sentences – *Love God. Love others.*

This is our core – what I would call our "operating system" – without it, nothing else in life works. **Amen.**