**LOVE ACTIVELY**

Wesleyan Rooted Series

By Rev. Corey Jones

Mark 12:28-31

There’s a story set back when electricity was first introduced in a little Scottish village and almost everybody in the village switched from propane lanterns to electricity as soon as it could be hooked up. There was one couple that had to wait longer for the poles to go up and the wires to be strung. In the meantime, they continued using the propane lanterns. When the day finally arrived, that electricity was connected to their home, almost everyone in the village came to see their lights come on. They waited until it was completely dark outside and then the wife turned and flipped the switch. When she did, the light filled the room, and everyone cheered.

What if our love shinned so brightly, that it brought a community together and caused others to rejoice? What if we had to prove our love and show our love every day? What if the only way, we could be called, labeled, or counted as a Christian was to Love Actively?

In our Wesleyan tradition, we believe it is important to translate faith into loving action. Faith without works is dead (James 2:17). We view the Christian life as a dynamic journey rooted in a faith that works by love, leading to holiness of heart and life—active love of God and neighbor.

Today’s text from Mark 12:28-31 speaks to this:

*28One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” 29“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 30Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ 31The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’There is no commandment greater than these.”*

With this passage and our Wesleyan tradition, we’re reminded that as followers of Jesus Christ we’re called to put love into action. Yes, the Spirit of God is at work encouraging, empowering, and equipping us to… Love Actively.

Let’s pray: Gracious God, we thank you for your Spirit in this place and in all places. We pray that your Spirit would remain in a mighty way, as your Word is given and received. Amen.

**I. Teaching with Love…for All (v. 28)**

Our reading from Mark 12 follows questions that were posed to Jesus by the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees. They asked him about the appropriateness of paying taxes to Caesar and marriage at the resurrection. In the Gospel of Matthew, the scene is contentious. In chapter 22: 34-40, we see that once Jesus quieted the Sadducees, the Pharisees huddled up with them like a football team. Together, they devised a plan, settled on a particular question, and chose a knowledgeable expert in the law to ask their question. This was not out of genuine curiosity or confusion, but a strategic move to entrap Jesus.

Likewise, here in the Gospel of Mark, the questioning starts out this way (earlier in chapter 12). It is then, that, ***28****One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”* The teacher’s question could possibly be seen as another trick-question trap because it was believed that all 613 commandments identified by rabbis (not just the Top 10) were equally important, and picking one over another could invite criticism. Now even though the text doesn’t explicitly say this, we can receive the teacher of the law’s question as genuine and simply as a theological one. Now, picture yourself trying to keep up with 613 commandments, rules, and expectations at work, church, or in the grocery store, neighborhood, or on Interstate-4. Thankfully, Jesus will soon offer the answer that boils them all down to one or two.

How many of you would love this opportunity? Yes, imagine having Jesus here to answer questions about life, faith, and God. While we don’t have the earthly Jesus to ask him questions in-person, face to face, we still ask profound questions, like, why do bad things happen to good people? How should I share my faith at work, at school, or in my neighborhood and community? How could God really love me with all that I have done? Why are there so many religions and should we work to convert others? How do I approach dating, marriage, and sexual expression? And what is my calling and purpose in life? The list goes on and on and on. Fortunately, we believe in, worship, and serve a God that invites our questions. It is good, healthy, and human to have and ask questions. What are you asking Jesus today?

This teacher of the law doesn’t know how fortunate he is to have the chance to ask Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, a question. More so, when Jesus answers questions, it is life-changing, it is transformative, and it offers us a new perspective. Perhaps knowing this, even while trying to *“catch him in his words”* (vs. 13), the Pharisees and Herodians come to Jesus saying,

*14 “Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? 15Should we pay or shouldn’t we?”* (vs. 14-15). In verse 17, Jesus gives a wise, godly answer to *17 “‘Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.’ And they were amazed at him.****18****Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question.* ***19****‘Teacher…’”*

Interestingly, all three groups of religious leaders address Jesus as Teacher. This could be sarcastic and insincere, but they still recognized something different about him and his teaching. What they do not recognize is that Jesus Christ is THE Teacher. Jesus is Lord, Savior, King, Redeemer, and Teacher. Jesus leaves them all amazed because he is the embodiment of God’s truth and love.

Our Lord and Teacher came to explain and exemplify for us the depths of God’s love for the world, each of us, and all. Often times, we hear God’s love described by the word *agape.* Truly, though,there is no one, spoken word to fully comprehend or express God’s love. Dr. M. Eugene Boring says,

“The author who composed in Greek was in approximately the same situation as the English interpreter in having several words for “love” that overlapped in meaning. In Greek as in English there was and is no single Greek word with an inherent meaning that refers exclusively to the kind of love with which God loves the world…Let it clearly be said: *agape* was not such a word…”

The word *agape* doesn’t fully define God’s love. The only word to define, describe, and determine God’s everlasting, mysterious, powerful, unconditional love is Jesus Christ, *the Living Word* of God. Jesus is the Teacher *and* Object Lesson. Jesus is not just a messenger; Jesus is *The* Message of God’s love for the world, for us, for you, and for all.

Jesus teaches us God’s love for all with his words, like the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). But the emphasis is not simply on hearing, as Jesus says in 7:24, *everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise [person] who built his house on the rock.* Jesus, himself, connected his words and love for God to his actions and love for others. Throughout the four Gospels, Jesus teaches us God’s love for all with his actions.

Jesus teaches us to love actively when he cast out demons. Jesus teaches us to love actively when he restored sight to the blind. Jesus teaches us to love actively when he enabled a paralytic to walk. Jesus teaches us to love actively when he cured a woman bleeding for 12 years. Jesus teaches us to love actively when he touched lepers. Jesus teaches us to love actively when he fed a hungry crowd. Jesus teaches us to love actively when he ate with sinners and outsiders. Jesus teaches us to love actively when he welcomed children and the most vulnerable. Jesus, teaches us to love actively when he carried the Cross, was put on the Cross, and died on the Cross. Yes, God defines the true meaning of love in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. By looking at the way Jesus treats people, especially the outcast and vulnerable, we see love in action.

Again, this love is for the entire world, for all, and for you. In his book, *If God Has a Refrigerator, Your Picture is On It*, the late author and United Methodist pastor, Rev. James W. Moore, says, “If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it. If [God] had a wallet, your photo would be in it. [God] sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning...face it, friend, God’s crazy about you!”

Along with teaching us how much we are all loved, Jesus also teaches us how to answer the question, *“‘Of all the commandments, which is the most important?’* ***29****‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.* ***30****Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’” (vs. 28b-30).*

**II. Responding with Love…for God (v. 29-30)**

Here, Jesus references the Shema from Deuteronomy 6, emphasizing the unity of God. Then, he states the commandment that the heart, soul, mind, and strength are to be unified in our love for God. During the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches important lessons on how to focus our lives and love on God. In Matthew 6:21, the Teacher says, “*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”* In 6:24, the Teacher says, “*You cannot serve both God and money.”* In 6:33, the Teacher says, “*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* Jesus instructs on how to love God passionately and wholeheartedly, stressing the importance of listening and acting in faith. Jesus emphasizes this throughout his life, teachings, and ministry. We are called to both, hear and do. In Luke 10:38-42, Jesus teaches us the importance of being with and listening to him. It says:

***38****As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.****39****She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord*’*s feet listening to what he said.****40****But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked,* “*Lord, don*’*t you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!”* ***41***“*Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things,****42****but few things are needed—or indeed only one.[*[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+10:38-42&version=NIV%2523fen-NIV-25406a)*] Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”*

How do we choose what is better? How do we love God with all our heart and soul?Loving God with all of your heart means making God your greatest treasure. It is valuing and prioritizing your relationship with Jesus more than anything else in your life. It is when you focus your will, desires, passions, affections, and emotions on God. Loving God with all myheart and soul means loving God with all that I am. Our love for God is cultivated within us, at our deepest core, and grows from there. In *Ordering Your Private World*, Gordon MacDonald writes:

“For me the helpful metaphor for the inner spiritual center has been a garden, a place of

potent peace and tranquility. This garden is a place where the Spirit of God comes to

make self-disclosure, to share wisdom, to give affirmation or rebuke, to provide

encouragement, and to give direction and guidance. When this garden is in proper order,

it is a quiet place, and there is an absence of busyness, of defiling noise, of confusion.

The inner garden is a delicate place, and…bringing order to the spiritual dimension of our

private worlds is spiritual gardening. It is careful cultivation of spiritual ground. The

gardener turns up soil, pulls out unwanted growth, plans the use of the ground, plants

seeds, waters and nourishes, and enjoys the harvests that result. All of this is what many

have called spiritual discipline.”

As United Methodist, these spiritual disciplines that help cultivate our inner being and love for God are the works of piety. These are God’s gifts to us, enabling us to grow in our love for God and personal holiness. While we all gravitate towards different ones at various times in our lives, they all remain useful for loving God with our heart and soul. We respond to God’s love by loving God in our worship, prayer, fasting, meditating, *and* using our mind, reason, and intellect. Loving God and having faith in Jesus does not mean giving up knowledge and understanding. Rather, loving God with all our mind embraces study and thought that nurtures our faith and relationship with God. We love God with our minds when we read scripture alone, as a couple, with family, in a small group, or in worship. We also love God with our minds when we learn and grow intellectually, for any study of truth is the study of God and how God creates and orders our lives and world.

**III. Living with Love…for Others (v. 31)**

Loving God with all our heart, soul, and mind, and growing in personal holiness through the works of piety leads and connects to (and is even revealed in) the second commandment. Jesus says in vs. 31, *“The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’  There is no commandment greater than these.”* Notice, Jesus doesn’t even answer the question as it was asked. He is asked for the greatest, single commandment. Instead of leaving it with just one, Jesus declares the second one, coupling them together.

Lakeland, Florida not only houses our Florida Conference building, but also the mighty Lakeland High School Dreadnaughts. The school motto is “*nulli secundus”* which is a Latin phrase meaning “Second to None.” While the entire school can claim this, it certainly applies to the nationally recognized football team. They have won nine state championships, including the last two years. In the city of Lakeland, they truly are *nulli secundus.*

The second commandment is *nulli secundus.* Again, inthe Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that our love for God is expressed and revealed in loving others. Love, in its truest and fullest form and expression (forgiving, sacrificing, caring, speaking truth, showing compassion, being romantic, parenting, committing, serving) is from God, of God, and is the Spirit of God amongst us. Thus, to love, means to live godly, and to live godly, means to love. For it is only because of God’s empowering love that we have the capacity to do what Jesus taught: to turn the other cheek, offer more than what’s taken, go the extra mile, and love our enemies. Jesus, the Teacher and Message, didn’t just say these words, he also lived them. His life, death, and resurrection teaches us how to live and how to love others, faithfully and sacrificially. This means that love is not merely a feeling inspired by Jesus or a concept in the teachings of Jesus, but an active way of life modeled and made possible by Jesus.

Yes, it’s hard living into the second commandment to “*Love your neighbor as yourself” (vs. 40)*. But we must remember, it’s *nulli secundus.* The Spirit of God moves us from loving God to loving neighbor, from personal holiness to social holiness, from works of piety to works of mercy, and from loving God with all our heart, mind, and soul to loving God with all our strength. This is active love. Love actively.

What Jesus says to us and demonstrates for us is that loving God means loving, welcoming, including, and embracing all of God’s beloved children. Utilizing all our strength to love means using our abilities and spiritual gifts, our connections and influence, our assets and finances, our positions and authority, and our words and actions. Such strong love includes acts of compassion and acts of justice, both of which are intended to manifest the love of God in the world and bring about the Kingdom of God. While our individual acts of compassion and justice can’t change the entire world, Jesus tell us to start with the closes neighbor in need.

Remember, we are called both to hear and do. In Luke 10:25-37 (the story right before Martha and Mary), Jesus answers another expert in the law who asked, *“who is my neighbor?”* In this well-known answer, *The Parable of the Good Samaritan,* Jesus paints the picture of who is a neighbor (someone in need) and who can be neighborly (anyone with opportunity).At the end of the parable, Jesus asks the expert in the law, *36“Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” 37**The expert in the law replied, ‘The one who had mercy on him.’ Jesus told him, ‘Go and do likewise.’”* Even though it’s a commandment, we have to be reminded and encouraged to go and do likewise, because we often overlook those in need.

In 1973 at Princeton, psychologists Darley and Batson conducted research and released their findings in “From Jerusalem to Jericho.”The research focused on theology students that were told that they were to go across campus to deliver a sermon on the topic of the Good Samaritan. As part of the research, some of these students were told that they were late and needed to hurry up. Along their route across campus, Darley and Baston had hired an actor to play the role of a victim who was coughing and suffering. 90% of the “late” seminary students ignored the needs of the suffering person in their hurry to get across campus. The study reports, “Indeed, on several occasions, a seminary student going to give their talk on the parable of the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the victim as they hurried away!”

If we were the professors, would we give them credit for a good sermon, if they had stepped over the victim? What credit is it to them and us to have great faith and no good deeds? What credit is it to us if our circumstances dictate our actions more than our love? What credit is it to us if we only love certain people or when it’s convenient? Loving others is hard. But the more time we spend being with and listening to Jesus, the more we move from being Mary to the Good Samaritan and are prepared to see and respond to those around us with active love.

Yes, what does loving actively look like for you in your home, relationships, daily interactions, or at work, amongst friends, out in the community, and here at church? What does loving actively look like for you living out your calling? It could be volunteering in church ministries, serving out in the community and local schools, starting a Fresh Expression, supporting Wesley Foundations, participating in the work of dismantling racism, building the Beloved Community, mentoring children and youth, helping campers attend the Warren Wills Camp, taking a mission trip, or advocating for the vulnerable.

Putting our love into action every day, throughout the day is hard. Dr. Clifton Black, United Methodist Pastor and Princeton Seminary Professor, writes, “we can’t possibly find within us the power to give ourselves for others. God alone has made love a reality for us.”

We have the powerful love of Jesus within us, ready to shine to the world around us. Truly, we can love others because God continuously loves us in Christ and empowers us for a life of love in the Holy Spirit as we follow Jesus.

Go and love actively; it is the only and real way you can be called, labeled, and counted as a follower of Jesus. *Amen!*