

“Drawing Near as We Draw Apart”

Mark 12:28-44

New Revised Standard Version

**This manuscript is an interpretation of the sermonic moment. Use it as a guide for the sermon direction; because of time, not everything you read printed here is actually included in the spoken sermon.*

So, here we are - in the middle of a pandemic. Coronavirus. COVID-19. We are navigating completely uncharted territory. Although navigating is probably too strong of a word. Navigating implies you know some sense of direction, that you know where you are going, perhaps even that you've been there before or at least you're trusting the experience and expertise of someone else who has been there before...even if that someone is Google Maps.

But we haven't been here before, have we? The experience we're trusting is barely a month or two old...in some cases just a week or a day old...information coming from China and Italy and New York...places that are just slightly ahead of where we are now. One of the headlines I read this weekend is that Colorado is watching what happens in California with their shelter in place laws. We are watching to see how that

works...how it practically unfolds, what the economic implications are, the medical implications, the psycho-social implications. We are watching, indeed. Holed up in our homes (if we're lucky enough to not be sick and in the hospital and if we're lucky enough to have a house or a roof under which to sit and if we're not one of the ones on the front lines like our government leaders, our medical professionals, our first responders, our grocery clerks and pharmacists) - we are holed up in our homes watching.

Watching some Netflix maybe, but mostly watching the news, right? All the news. Switching channels. Just to see if what one person is saying is what another person is saying. 9News, CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, Colorado Public Radio, National Public Radio, New York Times, Washington Post, Denver Post, Huffington Post. You name it - I've either channel surfed it this week, or

scrolled through the app or
livestreamed it on my phone.
What about you?

After a while, you just have to
turn it off, don't you? Those
big red circles growing larger
across the map of the United
States. Watching it all is a
rollercoaster of emotions, but
mostly it make makes me feel
exhausted because every new
development or government
order means a new decision to
make as a leader or a new
disruption to our lives.

Restaurants are closed, so my
husband Damon is out of a job.
We finally got through
yesterday to defer our mortgage
payments and he's trying to
make it through online to apply
for unemployment, but the site
is overloaded. And these are
just economic
stresses...nothing like the
scariness of those facing illness
or death, friends and loved ones
who are sick. But every
disruption in our lives, whether
economic or health-related or
job-related or even just in our
own routine or where we work
out...they all have an impact
and it's tough. Students are
missing graduations and proms
and recitals. Long-awaited

travel is cancelled. Every loss
stings.

And it's tough because all of
these changes and guidelines
are coming at the mercy of this
virus and the latest news to
come out from our governor's
office and mayor's office, or
the CDC or White House. I
mean, at one point this week
9News finally had to break into
a White House press briefing
because Governor Polis had
been waiting a while and they
were pressed to get to the local
briefing. Thank God they didn't
try to run them simultaneously.
The cacophony of voices is
already so loud. So many
leaders and experts who are
working 24/7 so hard, weighing
in with what they know to be
true for this minute. Doing their
best. And we owe them a debt
of gratitude. I can't imagine
what it's like to be in their
shoes.

But if we're not an expert, if
we're just you and me sitting
on the couch seeing our world
change before our eyes and
feeling completely powerless
about it, more than navigating
our way *through this*, it feels
like we are watching it all
happen *to us*. And I think that's

what so hard. That's where we lose our footing and start to feel untethered. Because it's all new. For all of us.

At one point when I was listening to a news briefing this week, I was struck by how much it reminded me of where we are in Mark's gospel right now.

In this news briefing I was watching, the emotions were heightened. And I get it; people are exhausted, and exhaustion never helps us be our best selves. But somehow dignity and kindness and compassion had gone by the wayside. Defensive had taken over. And it's like there was a clear divide of "us versus them" when really we're all in this together, right? Leadership and experts, Governors and Presidents were standing on one side of the podium, and all the news reporters on the other side. And lots of folks were firing questions...all at the same time.

And the way Mark tells it, I wonder if this is how Jesus felt as he headed into Jerusalem. It was to be the last week in his life. Mark knows this as he's writing the narrative of his

gospel. And he's a brilliant writer, because we feel the intensity and the anxiety and the nervousness growing in Jerusalem as Jesus draws nearer and nearer to the Temple. To the very place where supposedly God was to be most present and the people most faithful. But the more Jesus draws near, the quicker the questions come. And most of the questions are really veiled accusations. Like a news briefing, the voices are chaotic...and they all start to pile one on top of the other. And blur together. And they all want the "expert Jesus' opinion."

Well, let's just look at Mark 11 and 12 for a minute. Jesus arrives in Jerusalem and he immediately goes to the Temple where he starts disputing with various groups and leaders from the Jewish people...his own people...his own religious tradition of the day. First he starts overturning tables and driving out the money-changers - and the chief priests and the scribes didn't like it one bit. And at that point, they began looking for a way to kill Jesus.

A bit later Jesus is walking in to the Temple again and he's approached by the chief priest, the scribes and the elders who say, "*By what authority do you do these things?...Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it a human baptism?*" (v23, 30). Jesus answers them by speaking to them in parables - the parable that Alice preached on last week - which reveals that fear and greed are often motivating factors in us; it's an indicting parable. After this parable the authorities are sure they are ready to arrest Jesus.

But instead of just outright arresting him, in Mark 12:13, they send some Pharisees and Herodians to try and trap Jesus with a question about taxes, of all things. Jesus answers them surprisingly - "*give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's,*" (v17). The Pharisees and the Herodians are amazed. Jesus answered their question better than they thought.

But then along come the Sadducees. And the Sadducees try to trap Jesus with a question about the resurrection and who

will be whose husband and wife in heaven. And Jesus essentially says, "*You've got God all wrong...God is about the living, not the dead,*" (v 27).

And so at this point, it's almost as if we're picturing Jesus behind a presidential podium...and news reporters with microphones are all around him...he's been questioned by the Chief Priests, the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Herodeans, and the Sadducees, not to mention his own disciples (his own cabinet, if you will), and even some random folks in the crowd.

And this brings us to today's text. And the reporter (i.e. scribe) who cuts through the cacophony of voices - who stops all the distracting questions with the distinct voice of reason...you know the one. You know the reporter that finally asks the question that's been on the hearts and minds of every person listening? The question that really matters?

That's what this Scribe is about to do. To be *that* guy. And look, remember that if you are Jesus...all these "reporters," all

these Scribes and Chief Priests and Pharisees and Herodeans and Saducees...they are all religious officials that represent the religious establishment of the day...(kind of like a room of reporters...all with the same job but a slightly different take on their job based on what newsstation or newspaper they're with)...these religious officials are probably all starting to sound a lot alike to Jesus. And he probably doesn't want to take one more question. Especially from another Scribe.

But he does. And this guy makes the room go silent. He puts his hand up and he doesn't ask a tricky or theoretical question about authority or about human/divine baptism, or about taxes, or about who's gonna be who's spouse in heaven...this Scribe cuts through all of that seeming nonsense...all of those periphery questions and says, "What matters?"¹

It's such a basic question. But it gets to the heart of our faith: "*What is the greatest commandment?*" (v28).

¹ Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, & Kathryn Schifferdecker, "NL Podcast 402: Great Commandment," *I Love to Tell the Story* (14 March

What matters?

I don't know about you, but I've had to stop several times this week and ask myself as a person...as a pastor...what really matters right now?

Love. That was my answer. Love and connection. That is what matters right now. That overwhelming feeling of love that connects us all to one another...that no amount of social distancing or sheltering in place can disrupt or disconnect. That trusting connection that can only be the Love of God. And if my faith is built on anything...it is built on the steadfast and unending love of God that is faithful from generation to generation as the Psalmist writes in Psalm 100:5, "*For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*"

It's the kind of generational love that carried the Israelites, the people of God through slavery and captivity and across

2020), accessed on March 22, 2020 at https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1241.

the Red Sea and into the Promised Land.

It's the kind of generational love that sustained the people of God with manna (just enough food and toilet paper for each day - no more no less) as they wandered in the wilderness and wondered if it was better to be here in this land of unknowns even though they were free...or was it better to be back enslaved and under Pharaoh's control because at least then they knew what to expect? You see, as God's people, we've never liked the unknown. We've never liked not knowing how to navigate. We like routine. So much so that we'll long for enslavement over freedom just because we know what to expect and how to function in that reality.

But God has always led us through - keeping our eyes on something greater than our own limited imaginations and understanding can comprehend or dream. Again the Psalmist, *"I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of Heaven and Earth."* This is our God. The very one who created us, and

knows us, as the Psalmist writes in Psalm 139, *"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you."*

Our God has been faithful when the people of God have not been faithful. Remember the stories we read last fall through the Old Testament? Stories of people not worshipping God of making idols out of temporary things (and yes, an idol doesn't just have to be a golden calf; it can be the latest breaking news story too), stories of the people of God not remembering their faith and of complaining and lamenting that all is lost, and God always, always, returning again and again with presence

and more promises? Isaiah?
Jeremiah? And then...Jesus.

Even stories of the faithfulness of God in *Jesus' own life* as he prayed in the Garden to let this cup pass from him, and Jesus' friends abandoned him, and even Jesus himself FEELS abandoned by God, quoting the same Psalmist who proclaimed God's faithfulness who also said, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Psalm 22)

Stories of the faithfulness of God in the midst of the early church after Jesus had come and gone and breathed words of Peace into their lives "*My peace I give to you, my peace I leave with you, I do not give to you as the world gives, do not let your hearts be troubled and do not let them be afraid,*" (John 14:27). Even after Jesus had blessed them with his peace and given them the presence of the Holy Spirit, oh these early churches struggled didn't they?

They fought and disputed and got their priorities wrong and failed to take care of the widows and the orphans and they got caught up in things

like what prayers to pray and this and that...and the Apostle Paul had to keep drawing each of these communities back, the Galatians, the Corinthians, and yes even the Romans, reminding them, "*Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? (Or Virus?!)* No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord," (Romans 8:35, 37-39).

The people of God - even Jesus himself - have sometimes wondered - *where in the heck is God* - and God has always steadfastly answered by saying. I'm here. My Love is here. It has always been here. It will always be here. Because I AM. I AM the very ground you walk on. I AM the very air you breathe. I AM the very spirit that connects you all to one another. I AM. I am LOVE.

Alpha and Omega. Beginning and End. Through sickness and in health, in death and in life - God is here. God is love.

That's what matters. That is the core of our faith. Physical distance is no match for the love of God. God's love extends beyond borders. God's love extends beyond masks and gloves. God's love extends beyond screens and into living rooms...beyond hospital curtains and into hospital beds. The coronavirus may one of the most contagious viruses in recent memory, but it cannot be caught by God. It cannot threaten the breath of God's love...the aliveness of God's Spirit in us. No virus can violate God's love for us.

Now yes, a virus can make us wonder about our own love for God. A virus can make us vacillate back and forth between fear and frustration and despair and anger and grief. And that's okay. Virus' may make us waver. But a virus does not and can not make God waver. Ever.

Does the coronavirus make God grieve? Yes, I believe God is crying and lamenting with us

right now. The coronavirus may have stopped us all in our tracks (literally), but it cannot stop God's love from getting to us or from living within us. Because more than any struggle or suffering, more than any grief or grievance, more than any war or famine or plague or pandemic (and God has seen it all even if we haven't!)...God is Love.

That's what matters.

And that's why *this* Scribe - this fellow religious official who is on the one hand like all his other newscaster-esque colleagues and on the other hand so very different - that's why he asks, "*What matters? What's the greatest commandment?*"

And when Jesus answers him, it's like a breath of fresh, yet familiar air. Jesus states something that this Scribe already knows to be true from his own tradition in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18: "*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 you strength. And the second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these, '" (Mark 12:29-31).

This is breath-taking clarity in the midst of a high anxiety time in the life of Jesus and in the life of the Temple and religious officials of the day. Everything in their world felt up-ended too. Jesus had literally visualized this for them by turning over the money-changing tables in the Temple. And right after this passage he reminds them that the long prayers they say in public to show how religious they are and the fancy banquets they throw to show how important they are and the money that they keep in their pockets to remain rich (unlike the widow who gives all she has) and all the large stones that make up the large building of the Temple that they all love so much...all of these things, Jesus says, are not the point. The point is as clear as day.

The point is God's love. You could even say, since we're talking about navigating our way through uncertain times...the North Star that will

guide this cruise ship of coronavirus that we all seem to be trapped on...the cloud of smoke by day and the pillar of fire by night that will guide the wandering people of God in the wilderness...is God's love.

I'm not telling you anything new here. I'm just reminding you of what you already know to be true. Just as Jesus did with the Scribe. When faced with a lot of questions...and a lot of uncertainty...take it back a step. Strip it down. Focus on what matters. God's Love.

And - on how we respond to that love and how we make it real in our lives...because that matters too.

This is why I love what happens next in this exchange with Jesus and the Scribe. What happens next is that the Scribe says to Jesus, *"You are right. Loving God with all that we have and all that we are...and loving our neighbor as ourselves...."* - this is so much more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices. If we can imagine ourselves as the Scribe here, what we might say to Jesus is, "You are right Jesus...what's WAY more

important than gathering in our church pews and sitting in our classrooms and board rooms and offices and pretty church sanctuary - while we love to do that and while we love that place called Calvary Baptist Church of Denver - what's way more important is to BE Calvary Baptist Church of Denver wherever we are...that is, to BE the Church, the Body of Christ, to love God with all that we are and all that we have and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The building may be closed, but the church is not. The church, the people of God...we are open for business...now, more than ever. In fact, we are living into our calling now more than ever.

You see, this season in which we find ourselves is an opportunity. To learn for the first time, perhaps, or to re-learn and re-member what it means to be the people of God. What it means to love God - with everything we've got. What it means to love one another. And - what it means to love ourselves.

“Social distancing” and “sheltering in place” are the catch phrases of the week. I

was going to say year, because this past week feels like a year!...but those phrases of “social distancing” and “sheltering in place” - they are important cautionary and instructive phrases for our health and for our hospitals and health care providers and for our community - but they are not theological or psychological statements. They refer to physical distance...but not the distance of the heart.

We can be closer now than we've ever been. But it's going to take some work to do that and be that for each other because we have to learn new ways of being in the world. Our brains have to re-wire their circuits. We have to learn new technological skills. We have to pick up the phone. Maybe we even have to pull out pen and paper. I know someone who signed up for a Facebook account for the first time this week. And I know several of you tried ZOOM for the first time this week. Virtual high five! Some of these things come naturally to some of us, other things couldn't feel more foreign.

But the great thing about the greatest commandments - to Love God, Love Neighbor, and Love Self (because we can't Love our Neighbor as we Love Ourselves if we don't Love Ourselves) - is that we can each work on something.

For some of us, this season is about learning to Love God in a way we've never had to before. Learning to trust God and put our security in God instead of in our paycheck or our job or our 401K. This may look like praying more. Trying to form words to what you are feeling and voice those to God. Or praying through meditation - which is the opposite of that...trying to clear all the words out of your head and just focus on an image of Love and Light embracing you. This may look like opening your Bible and reading through the Psalms. Or through Paul's letters. Or through the book of Exodus. Or the book of Job. Or heck, back through the Gospel of Mark. All of these texts show the faithfulness of God's presence through trying and uncertain times. Learning to Love God more deeply may look like reading a devotional book or journaling or listening

to hymns or songs that tell the story of our faith in meaningful and life-giving ways. If you are a health care professional or first responder or still having to work through this time out in public, learning to Love God more deeply for you through this time may simply mean starting your day with a mantra or breath prayer - like, *"When I breathe in, I breathe in peace, when I breathe out, I breathe out love"* - even if that means repeating that to yourself behind a mask trying not to breathe in germs. Remind yourself of your true breath and true source of Life. Loving God may mean sitting down to really think about what you believe to be true about God - no matter what is going on in the world. Learning to Love God may mean releasing anger and frustration and expletives at God and realizing that God can take it. God is not fazed by your emotion. God is pleased that you show up and show your authentic self to God. Because we can't hide from God any more than we can hide from ourselves.

So let's talk about ourselves for a second too. Because we can't Love our Neighbor if we don't

Love Ourselves. In this season where many of us, not all of us, but many of us find ourselves with our routines upended and we are now at home and confined to be with just ourselves our just ourselves and our partner or children or immediate family...we have an opportunity to get to know ourselves in a way that we never have before because most of us don't prioritize self-care or self-development or self-knowledge. Now is the time to slow down and get to know ourselves in ways that honestly can truly feel like a luxury. But if that sounds very uncomfortable to you and kind of "new agey" like "I don't need to 'get to know myself'" then you probably DO need to get to know yourself. Learning to Love Ourselves will look different for each of us. But know this - for those of you in a nursing home or in a situation where you can't even go outside, and you may feel bad about not being able to "do" anything...just "being" is enough. Your job right now - your growth - may just be to give grace and patience to yourself. Review your life story in your mind's eye...find things you are grateful for in each

season of your life. Write that down if you can. We've talked a lot about writing letters to others, but maybe use this time to write some letters to yourself. To tell yourself the gifts of God that you see in yourself. To set some goals for growth for yourself. Or maybe the goal is just to get comfortable in your own skin...to live with a little less shame and a bit more forgiveness. Maybe this season is about cutting yourself some slack and learning to see yourself as beloved.

So when you see pictures on the news of people going out and helping others or doing something tangible that you can't do right now - for whatever reason - remember that in this greatest commandment - none of these Loves are greater than the other. They are all one in the same. Loving God in action is Loving Neighbor and we can't Love our Neighbor as Ourselves unless we really Love Ourselves and when we Love Ourselves, usually that's the point where we begin to comprehend what it means for God to love us and then for us

to Love God. See how cyclical it all is?

And so finally - Loving Neighbor. The commandment that feels the most practical and tangible to us right now. We think of Loving Neighbor as DOING. But right now - it's more about BEING. Please stay home. From what I know of you Calvary, you are all staying home and I'm so grateful. But as one of our chaplains reminded me this week - those who often are the most active and most servant-oriented in our congregations are those who are recently retired, right? Because you're still healthy and strong and have time and gifts to offer the world but you don't have a regular day job. So you volunteer. But right now - you are vulnerable. Even if you don't feel that you are. You are. So Loving Neighbor looks different if you're usually the one working Bootstraps or driving around town doing errands for everyone else. You're having to learn what it means to Love Neighbor by not being out and about...if not for your own health, than to Love your Neighbor who is an ICU nurse or a triage doctor.

But - there are practical things we can do to Love Neighbor no matter our age. Write cards. Send texts. Make phone calls. Give online. If you can sew - sew masks...there are patterns online. If you're younger and healthy, you can run errands for others, pick up prescriptions, donate blood, work in a food pantry - there are all kinds of resources online. And something we can all do that is Loving our Neighbor is countering any message of hate or discrimination or that isolates those who have COVID-19...whether it's sending Chinese-Americans that you know a word of support or just responding to inaccurate information on Facebook with a message of Love instead of Hate. Another act of Loving Neighbor is to think of people or groups of people that you struggle to love...and use this time to pray for them and see them as your Neighbor. These are all acts of Loving Neighbor.

Yes, coronavirus is a pandemic. The effects are far reaching and overwhelming to think about. We don't have a timeline on it. We are told we are going to be have to be far apart for a while.

But there are possibilities within this pandemic to be the people of God in ways we have never been before. As we draw apart to protect each other, we can draw near to connect with each other. God is calling us to draw near. There is truly something in this time for all of us to learn. About Love. About how to draw near to God, to our Neighbor, and to Ourselves.

Pick one. For today. Maybe tomorrow it'll be the same. Maybe it'll be different. Rotate around and focus on one of the three for a week at a time. Or not, dive deeply into just one of these aspects of the greatest commandment. Whatever you choose, you will be choosing to LOVE and therefore you'll be choosing to root yourself in the heart of our faith, rather than in the whipping waves of statistics and stories that will no doubt continue to storm and swirl around us. As much as you can - ground yourself in God during these days. We are all in this together.

And in closing, you know how Jesus responds to this Scribe when he reiterates the truth of loving God, Neighbor, and Self?

Jesus says, "*You are not far from the kin-dom of God,*" (Mark 12:34). Another way to say this is - You are *near* to the kin-dom of God. Loving God, loving neighbor, loving self...that is the closet you'll come to bringing the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven. When you love in these ways, you draw *near*. Nearness is not solely about geographical distance or physical proximity (as much as we've been conditioned to feel and experience it as such)...Nearness is about Openness of Heart and Expansiveness of Love.

Could we use this coronavirus crisis to bring the kin-dom of God nearer to earth than it's ever been?

Because here's the other mic drop moment of Mark's passage. After Jesus tells the Scribe he's not far from the kin-dom of God, Mark writes, "*And after that - no one dared to ask Jesus anymore questions,*" (Mark 12:34).

When you know the answer, you don't need to keep asking questions.

The questions about
Coronavirus are going to keep
coming. For sure. And,
hopefully we'll learn more and
more answers. Thanks be to
God for scientists and reporters
and researchers and doctors
who are working hard to help
us find those answers.

But the one question that
already has an answer? Where
is God in all this? Where is
God? God is here. Because God
is Love, God is *in* YOUR acts
of Love. God is present in any
and all acts of Love...any and
all gestures that show that we
are drawing nearer to God,
nearer to neighbor, and nearer
to ourselves. In every and all
acts of Love, *that* is where God
is.

Maybe we do have what we
need to navigate this season,
after all.

Maybe we do have the only
answer that we need.

Amen.