

Sermon: With All Your Hearts

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, November 3, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Running a marathon is not for the faint of heart. It is a total commitment from the whole person, to even attempt to run the distance of 26 miles, or roughly the equivalent of 42 km. It is a sport that demands every ounce of you literally, that makes you feel like you are going to die a slow and painful death every time you set foot on the course.

As you start, it is imperative to block out all outside noises—ecstatic fans, coach's yells, teammates' cheer. All gone, except the sound of your own shoes pounding on the ground, and the sound of your own heart thumping in the chest. You tell yourself 'don't stop', 'don't look at your watch, and 'never look back', as your muscles tighten in protest.

Dehydration creeps up on you, resulting in tearing cramps that make you want to topple over in searing pain. The first part of the run may be all legs, the middle part all mind, but the final part is all heart. You pray to God that you don't faint, trip or fall, yet, you can't help but ask yourself, "Why the heck am I doing this in the first place?"

You see the flag ahead, the finish line a mile out, but your legs are gone, your mind is fried, and you are not sure how much more of your heart is really left to give. Yet you press on, you squeeze out that one last bit, giving it all you got.

That one final push, is what Jesus says, as the greatest commandment of all in our Scripture reading today, "*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. And You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*" (Mark 12:30-31)

This exhortation of double love of God and neighbours comes out of the context of disputes, between Jesus and religious authorities of his day. Prior to this text in Mark's Gospel, the chief priests, scribes and elders questioned the authority of Jesus. In response, Jesus spoke in parables. Then came Pharisees and some Herodians trying to trap Jesus with a question about paying taxes. Jesus countered with a clever retort of "giving to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are

God's." Finally came the Sadducees, putting forth a hypothetical situation concerning the resurrection. Jesus in turned used their flawed exegesis to expose their ignorance of the Scripture and of God's power.

Through all these disputes, the religious authorities were eagerly and maliciously trying to trap Jesus, to do him harm. They will succeed not long after, as Jesus knowingly (of God's plan) and obediently (of God's will) marched on through Jerusalem one final time, towards the cross. But not before the scribe in our focus text, came to Jesus with what appears to be an earnest question, "*Which commandment is the first of all?*"

It is a fair question as the Torah, the Law contains in all 613 specific commandments, rules, and regulations, and there were indeed vigorous debate in Judaism, as to which is the greatest. Of all the possible answers Jesus could've provided, he went with Deuteronomy 6:4, "Shema Yisrael", or "Hear, O Israel", often referred to simply as 'The Shema'. It is the central affirmation of Judaism, whereby the people of Israel were urged by Moses, to affirm that "*the Lord is our God, the Lord alone*" In a sea of polytheism of the ancient Near East, the people of God proclaims a belief in the singularity of Yahweh, the Lord alone is God, is worthy of universal devotion and worship.

The Shema continues with a specific command, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*" Some commentators have pointed out that Jesus seems to have added an additional clause of '*with all your mind*' in the dialogue recorded in Mark, indicating an intellectual affirmation of God.

The primary reason for such a difference is because Jesus was actually quoting, not from the Hebrew text, but from the Greek text of Septuagint. Additionally, in the Hellenic mindset, the head and the heart have distinctly different function, whereas in the Hebrew mindset, the heart is by far the most important organ mentioned in the OT, and the primary seat of both emotional and cognitive functions. Therefore, to love the Lord your God with all your heart encompasses an emotional commitment, as well as an affirmation of loyalty and faithfulness.

Soul or *nephesh* in Hebrew, constitutes the self and one's life force, possessing both psychological and biological elements. Thus 'all of your soul' goes further than just the singular self, but extending to the 'children' mentioned later in teaching of The Shema.

Strength or *me'od* in Hebrew has, once again, a double meaning. First it means 'might', or the pure strength emanating from one's body. But

it also mean ‘financial means’, suggesting one must love the Lord God with all of one’s wealth and possessions.

From the viewpoint of biblical anthropology, “heart”, “soul” and “strength” are not mutually exclusive but inclusive and overlapping categories. Taken all together, the exhortation to love “*with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength*” indicates the totality of one’s commitment in the purest and noblest intention of trust and obedience toward God, coming from our whole person, our every faculty, every capacity.

The second part of this commandment is “*You shall love your neighbour as yourself.*” The origin of this is actually Leviticus 19:18, near the end of the section called ‘various laws’, covering all sorts of ethical responsibilities. It should be noted that the elevation of loving your neighbour (and yes it is an elevation), is agreed upon by both Jesus and the scribe.

The qualifier of ‘as yourself’ is connected to the verb of ‘to love’. Now, I don’t think Mark (and Leviticus) is talking about the therapeutic sense of self-love, but simply a common sense that everyone begins with loving himself or herself. The key is to bring ‘loving neighbours’ into a healthy balance with ‘loving oneself’—how much one loves the neighbours is directly proportional to how much one loves the self. Too much of self-love leads to narcissism, too little leads to self-loathing—neither of which is healthy. By channeling self-love into loving others, it highlights the communal aspect of us human beings, that we are made to live in community, and have thus ethical responsibility to one another.

Theologians have long debated as to the achievability of this double commandment to love, which Jesus calls the greatest. Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, calls Jesus’ vision of love an “impossible possibility”. It is impossible because such love is an ideal against which human failure was to be measured. Paul Ramsey argues that Christ came precisely to embody this agape love for the world, and to teach his disciples both the possibility and the priority of such love.

It is a possibility, for we love because God first loves us (1 John 4:19). It is a priority because the source of this agape love is precisely our Abba Father in Heaven, who so loved the world that God gave God’s one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

Upon hearing the answer Jesus provided of his initial question, the scribe responded, *“You are right, Teacher.”* He went on to repeat precisely the double commandments, then concluded with his own observation that *“this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”* It was a keen observation, a shot at the fervent religiosity of the day, and a position entirely consistent with prophetic tradition of Israel. To such a wise observation, Jesus commended the scribe with this high praise, *“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”*

It was a high praise for sure, yet falling short—not far, but still separated by a wide and uncrossable chasm. For by one’s own effort, either the scribe or anyone else, all our hearts, all our souls and all our strength can only take us so far, but not all the way.

David Wyeth was a runner who had trained for two full years in order to compete at the 2017 London Marathon. He was making decent time, two hours and fifty minutes in and only 300 meters to go till the finish line. But the calf issues that he had experienced earlier on, finally caught up with him. He stumbled, got up, but his legs were no longer cooperating—they had become jelly like. He took another step, then collapsed, as his eyes gazed ahead at that impossible goal, for he was at the end of his rope, and had nothing more left to give.

Then someone came up from behind him, lifted him up, a complete stranger, a runner by the name of Matthew Rees. David waved off his helper, telling Matthew to leave him be, for he simply could no longer run another step. But his helper would not comply. His record no longer matter, the helper urged David to keep going, *“You will finish, I won’t leave your side, we’ll get to that finish line.”* And together they did, amidst a cheering crowd.

That is precisely what Jesus does for us. By sacrificing himself on the cross, he paid the price that we could not possibly pay. By the resurrection, Jesus gives us hope that death is not the end, that life-everlasting is there awaiting us, those with faith. By being lifted up in glory and now sitting on the right-hand side of the Father, Christ Jesus lifts us up at the final stretch of our journey of faith. When we have no more left to give, he is there holding us close, saying *“I won’t leave your side, and we will get to that finish line.”* and angels with heavenly hosts cheer.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**