

## **“Persistent Presence”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
November 3, 2024 - Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

[Ruth 1:1-18; Mark 12:28-34](#)

This seems like a great day to talk about politics! You may have heard about the heated rivalry between the competing political factions, with the different parties working feverishly to promote their own ideas and heroes while denigrating the others as dangerous, loathsome outsiders to be feared and avoided. I am, of course, speaking of the rivalry between the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians, three major rivalling parties of the many in first century Palestine, who, as we read in our lesson from the gospel of Mark, were disputing with one another and Jesus sometime after his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

A Bible-teaching scribe approached Jesus amidst the scrum and asked him which commandment he considered to be most important. My guess is that the scribe was not asking because he truly sought the insight of Jesus, a wandering Galilean craftsman- turned-teacher, who was probably considered by the educated, cosmopolitan scribe as being just an illiterate country bumpkin, but was instead seeking to add fuel to the hotly burning rhetorical fire between Jesus and those who opposed him (and one another).

Jesus answered the scribe by telling him that the first commandment, the one that was most essential for them all as Children of Israel to follow was this: “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.” In this answer, Jesus reminded the scribe and the disputing political rivals that greater than their dividing traditions and differing ideas was their shared call to love their one God, for though they had many differences, they had but one God, and that this love for God should involve their whole being and take precedence over and inform all other aspects of their being, including their religious traditions and political allegiances.

And Jesus continued to answer by stating that this most-essential love for God should directly lead them to loving their neighbors, fellow children of God, no less

than they loved themselves, and that, together, loving God and loving our neighbors are the most important of all commandments.

The scribe agreed with Jesus that these were the greatest of all commandments, and the scribe went on to unpack what that meant for the disputing assembly by stating that God is one, and *there is no other*. This would have reminded the Herodians that their hero, the brutal King Herod, was not above God, was no god at all, and that their fervent allegiance to him should be less than their allegiance to the God of love. In agreeing with Jesus that loving God and loving neighbors were the most important considerations, the scribe reminded the Pharisees that their rules, which they cherished, having rules upon rules upon rules about everything and seeking to enforce them all on others, were comparatively insignificant and misguided if they did not help people to better love God and neighbor, which the scribe went on to say was more important than sacrifices, offerings, and all of their other temple rituals, which were the focus of the Sadducees.

Recognizing the scribe's wise response, Jesus told him that he was close to the realm of God. Perhaps the others assembled there, with their selfish love for political and religious power over others taking precedence over their love for God and their fellow creatures of God, recognized that they were not close to the realm of God, and in many ways opposed it, and so, we are told by the lesson, no one else dared to confront Jesus with more questions.

It's a good thing that we here don't put our love for our political and religious heroes and ideas and our quest to grow power in these realms over others ahead of our love for God and neighbor. Or do we? Certainly, the message of Jesus to the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees is good for us to hear and heed today as we are on the cusp of an election. Certainly, in our own competition of ideas and heroes we should remember our calling to keep our love of God and love of neighbor first. Certainly, keeping these first in our hearts and minds can help us in our own discernment and voting. Surely, keeping our priorities straight can help us in our decision-making and in all of our living, especially in these times as we anxiously face many unknowns.

This best path of loving God and loving others is path that so many of our spiritual ancestors, the saints of God, took in their own unsettled and uncertain times, and

this is the path their legacy inspires us to remain on today. We can be inspired to continue on the path of love by those ancestors who were near to us, as we do today on this day we remember loved ones whose earthly journeys have ended over the course of this last year, as well as those who are our ancient ancestors in faith, like Ruth, whose story we heard about in our first scripture lesson.

Ruth chose to cling to her mother-in-law Naomi and to share the difficult journey of living with her as a widow in the patriarchal society of a foreign land, where her agency would have been non-existent and her prospects bleak. But she insisted in remaining with Naomi, no matter the difficulties they would certainly face, out of selfless love and devotion, and we are grateful for her example that persists in being present with us today.

Friends, let us today be guided by the examples of selfless love for others that we have been blessed with, from Ruth to Jesus to the dear loved ones on our own roster of saints. As they remain with us, being persistently present as a great cloud of witnesses, may we sense them cheering us on to prioritize our love for God and neighbor in our own time. May we live always with our highest values of love for God and neighbor in mind; may we vote with these highest values guiding us. As we persist in living in love, may God's peace persist in being present with us and be in the world we serve. Amen.