

Resolve to Relate Sermon Series
“My Relationship with God”
Mark 12:28-34
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We have just recently celebrated the arrival of God’s greatest gift to us and today, on the second Sunday of Christmas, we are still celebrating the birth of Jesus and what his coming means for us and for the whole world. Some gifts you get you might want to keep to yourself for your own use and enjoyment and that’s perfectly acceptable if it’s an article of clothing or a box of chocolates or something, but today I want us to remember that Jesus isn’t a gift that we are meant to hold on to and keep to ourselves. God sent Jesus for you and for me, but God also sent Jesus for everyone, and God wants us to tell others about the gift we have received and to let others know that God’s gift is for them, too. This is something we know we’re called to do all the time, not just at Christmas or right after Christmas, but sometimes as we get caught up in life we get distracted, or we get lazy, or we fall behind on doing things that we mean to prioritize... and that’s why we have New Year’s resolutions! The beginning of a new year provides a natural opportunity to refocus and recommit to the things that we know are important, and if there is something that we want to get better at, it’s a natural time to start doing the things that will help us get better at whatever we want to get better at. So here we are on the second Sunday of Christmas and the first Sunday of a new year and it feels like a perfect time to recommit to the mission to share Jesus and to make some resolutions that could help us get even better at doing that and that’s what this sermon series, *Resolve to Relate*, is all about.

As we get started, I’ll tell you that the idea for this series came out of a book that a few of us read and discussed during the last 8 weeks of last year. The book is called *Unbinding the Gospel* and it’s a book about churches doing evangelism. Before the book was written, there was a 4-year study of hundreds of mainline congregations called The Mainline Evangelism Project and the purpose of the study was to find churches that were doing effective evangelism and to discover what motivated them and what they were doing that made them effective in doing evangelism. After the research came the book, which is about what those effective congregations are doing and what congregations that want to get better at doing evangelism can learn from them.

One of the important things that the author talked about in the book was what she called a Trinity of Relationships. The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that God is relational existing as 3 persons in one, and people who are made in God’s image are relational, too. God’s relational nature and our relational nature became important when they were observing churches because they realized that the churches that were really good at evangelism maintained strength and health in 3 different kinds of relationships. People in these churches had strong individual relationships with God; they had healthy relationships with each other in the church; and they had good relationships with people outside of the church. “God works powerfully through these sets of relationships in healthy churches,” the author said. “As individual relationships with God grow, people are able to be more real with each other within the church. As relationships within the church get richer, members of the church somehow know how to be better friends at work, in the neighborhood, coaching Little League.” Over the next 3 weeks, we will be thinking about

these 3 relationships and how our commitment to them can help us become more effective in sharing God's good news with others.

Before I go further, there is one last thing I want to say something about the word evangelism because we might have different ideas about what that word means or about what "doing" or "practicing" evangelism means. At the most basic level, evangelism is doing what I talked about at the beginning. It's sharing the wonderful gift of Jesus with others. In the book, the working definition is "anything that we do that helps another person move closer to a relationship with God or into Christian community." That's the definition that we can keep in mind as we go through this series.

We're beginning this series today with a familiar passage of Scripture. It's one that we know. One that we quote. One that is not particularly complex or hard to understand or interpret like some passages of Scripture are. You could say that it's basic, and we're starting here because when the researchers did all of their research, and they studied all of those churches and found the ones that were really effective at doing evangelism, what they discovered was not that these churches had come up with some really groundbreaking strategies, or that they were just full of people with a spiritual gift for evangelism, or that they had tons of money to spend on technology, and staff, and buildings, and programs, or that they had the most gifted and charismatic leaders in the country. Sometimes we might think that the reason that other churches grow must be because they have all of that stuff, but according to the research, none of that stuff was the most important factor for the churches that were great at sharing Jesus and doing effective evangelism. Instead, what the researchers found was that the churches and people that were the best and most effective at helping other people move closer to a relationship with God and into Christian community were churches and people who were just doing this very basic thing that Jesus tells us to do in our Scripture this morning. Let's listen to the passage now from Mark 12:28-34.

²⁸ 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?" ²⁹ Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰ 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.' ³¹ The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³² 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'; ³³ 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." ³⁴ 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.

In the verses leading up this passage, different religious leaders were asking Jesus questions about the law and trying to trip him up with tricky scenarios. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Emperor? What they were really saying was, "we believe that paying taxes to the Emperor is a denial of God's Sovereignty over us, but the civil law does require it, so do you want us to break the religious law or break the civil law?" And the Sadducees, thought they could trip him up with a complicated question related to the marriage laws. They wanted to trap Jesus, but it's like these religious leaders also just always wanted to show how hard it was for most normal people to please God. Someone of them prided themselves on how well they knew the law and

how good they were at keeping it, and yes, they the elite, could manage to do it, but it was definitely too hard for regular people, and certainly people like tax collectors and other sinners. The climax of all those tricky questions is what we read in Mark. Jesus breaks it down and says pleasing God and being on good terms with God isn't some complicated thing that only the most religious or disciplined people can do. He says it's as simple as this. Love God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength. If you do this, you'll be on the right track and you will see the fruit that you want to see in your life.

Of course, the religious leaders weren't the only ones to overcomplicate things. I think it's part of our human nature to overcomplicate lots of things, too, which might be why we get a little worried sometimes about things like whether we can keep the life and ministry of our church vibrant and attractive to new people for years to come, or whether we can be good at something like evangelism, or whether we can have a transformative influence on our community and people. We might feel like we don't have the courage, or the discipline, or the skills, or the knowledge, or the training to make those things happen, and maybe getting some courage, or training, or knowledge can help us, but Jesus tells us that the first and most important thing to do is to love God.

So, if we were to stand at the beginning of this new year and say, I resolve to love God with all my heart, and mind, and soul, and strength, what would we actually do? How would we follow through on a resolution like that? Well, we might come up with some ideas about how we could be more devoted to some particular spiritual practices. We might say I'm going to get up 15 minutes early every day so that I can pray. Or we might say, I'll commit to a Bible-reading plan and attempt to read the whole Bible in one year. We could say I will recommit to more regular attendance in worship. We could commit and recommit ourselves to spiritual practices like these, and spiritual practices *are* the means by which we receive God's grace and through which we encounter and draw nearer to God so by all means, commit and recommit to spiritual disciplines, *but* just doing these things is not what ignites an unquenchable flame of love in our hearts for the Lord.

In I John 4:8-10 we are told that **"...God is love"** and that **"God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."** After he tells us that God is the source of love, and that the depth and fullness of God's love is revealed to us in the giving Jesus who forgives and takes away our sin that deserves condemnation, then he says, **"We love because he first loved us."** This is where love for God begins. It doesn't come from the things that we do. Love for God begins when the Holy Spirit awakens our hearts to perceive the truth and the good news that God has loved us first and demonstrated that love to us by pouring mercy out on us through Christ. This doesn't mean that spiritual disciplines are not important because they are! Through the disciplines, we participate in our relationship with the God who loves us so much and we respond to God's great love. Through the disciplines we can grow to know, and understand, and experience God's love even more, but just knowing that we are loved by God first is how we begin to love God with our whole selves.

To receive and experience the knowledge of God's love for us in Christ is a transformative experience in so many ways. It transforms our outlook, and our priorities, and our relationships, and when it comes to getting better at sharing our faith it transforms us in that way, too, and

here's why. When we know that we are loved by God, and we are experiencing the blessings that come from having a personal and growing relationship with God, talking about it, and sharing it with others begins to become natural. Telling someone that we care about where our strength comes from in difficult times just makes sense, and it's natural to invite them to come to a place where they can hear about our source of strength, too. When we are awake and we're seeing the outpouring of God's goodness and kindness in our lives, acknowledging that in front of others doesn't feel strange. It just flows out. Without having to memorize talking points, and without having to force awkward interactions, loving God because we know we are loved becomes the thing that naturally motivates us to do things and to say things that help others move toward a relationship with God and into Christian community.

Like I said before, it might seem like getting better at evangelism individually and collectively should be more complicated than something as basic as knowing that we are loved by God and loving God in return, but isn't it great that it's not? Of all the things that the researchers found in their study of the churches that were doing effective evangelism, the most important discovery was that a vivid relationship with God is at the heart of evangelism. Each one of us can have a vivid relationship with God. That is within our reach because God offers it to us, and we just need to take hold of it and pursue it.

2022 is the 70th anniversary of Lakewood Presbyterian Church and LPC is and has been a church that God has used to share the good news about Jesus in this community throughout those years. I am confident that God is ready and willing to keep using us and is even ready and willing to expand the influence and fruitfulness of our ministry if we are ready and willing to participate. Let's resolve to begin this 70th year knowing the good news that we are loved, and forgiven, and blessed in every way by God through Jesus and may the Spirit strengthen us in our pursuits of a deeper relationship with God. Let's pray.