

Our Lenten Creed  
February 22, 2015  
Mark 12:28-31

Our Scripture reading is found in the twelfth chapter of Mark's Gospel. Beginning in the twenty-eighth verse, Jesus receives and responds to one of the most challenging questions imaginable with one of the most important answers he ever gave.

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?"

Jesus answered, "The first is, "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.'

The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

May God bless the reading and hearing of these familiar words.

Let us pray . . . Help us to really hear rather than simply listen to the words of Jesus about what matters most. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

The only course I have taught every semester since joining the faculty of Hodges University is a survey of world religions. Because so many incoming students assume they know far more than they actually do, I require them to take a religious literacy quiz and to write a short paper reflecting on their religious knowledge spanning all of the world's many religions. After these learning activities nearly all of my students admit they are somewhat literate in their own religion, but largely illiterate when it comes to other religions.

Those of us gathered here this morning have many years of experience as Christians, but various levels of knowledge about other world religions. Furthermore, I imagine that most of us have given little thought to how people outside of Christianity view our religion.

Rather than sharing the necessarily limited perspective on Christianity held by a specific adherent of another religion, I want to share the perspective of someone completely unfamiliar with the Way of Jesus.

Since those folks are few and far between in our country today, I will instead offer the perspective of an alien visitor. This perspective is provided through a story crafted by Harvey Cox, an American Baptist Minister who has been teaching at Harvard Divinity School since 1965.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Cox imagines how aliens might conceive of Christianity if they were given a chance to observe what modern day Christians do.

What does the word Christian really mean? The proverbial visitor from Mars walking the streets of America today could become mightily perplexed in trying to answer this question.

In most American cities he (or she or it, depending on whether such distinctions exist on Mars) would find dozens or even hundreds of buildings called "churches" in which people who call themselves "Christians" gather periodically to pray, sing, eat potluck dinners, get married, prepare the dead for burial, drink gallons of coffee, instruct each other about a book called the Bible and the beliefs they derive from it, shake each other's hands, and listen to sermons and homilies derived by men and women dressed in clothing never seen on other occasions.

In most of these buildings – often, though not always – marked by a cross and surmounted by a tower, the people would sometimes swallow small quantities of bread or a wafer and sip tiny amounts of wine, and at other times they would sprinkle small children and babies with water or immerse adults or teenagers completely in a special pool.

Some of these buildings would be enormous, and even an extraterrestrial visitor might be awed by their stained glass spaciousness. Others would be smaller and much more severe in décor. Still others would be tiny rooms that were once butcher shops or fish markets.

In some of these church edifices people would kneel, in some they would prostrate themselves in front of pictures, in others they would sit in neat rows, while in still others they might dance in the aisles and leap for joy with their hands extended over their heads.

In some, huge pipe organs would fill the space with Bach and Schubert and Mozart. In others people would shout and clap their hands to guitars, trap drums, and cymbals. In a few, they would sit in utter silence, with no musical instruments at all, and speak only occasionally.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey G. Cox, Jr., Hollis Research Professor of Divinity at Harvard Divinity School. Faculty page - <http://hds.harvard.edu/people/harvey-g-cox>

<sup>2</sup> Cox, H. (1993) Hinduism. In A. Sharva (ed.) *Our Religions*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 359-423.

Cox's story fascinates me; I could continue reading from it for the duration of the sermon. If I did you would learn what happens when his alien visitor travels from church to church interviewing worshippers. Rather than pass on those observations, I will share my own experiences.

I have one Christian education activity I use more than any other to help Christians work through what Christianity is all about. I have facilitated it in many churches with youth and also with adults.

This is how it works. Those gathered are divided into small groups of five to eight people. Each small group is asked to create a list of what it is one must believe to be labeled a Christian. The only rule is that for any item to make the list, every member of the group must agree it belongs on the list.

The conversation tends to be non-stop. The scribe rarely is overly taxed by the task of writing. When the allotted time is up, the small groups report their findings to everyone present. Almost all lists contain less than ten items. Some lists are non-existent because the group was unable to agree on anything.

This learning activity doesn't end there. For part two we compare all of the small group lists to each other, then place any item that appears on every list on a new master list. This new list represents what everyone present has agreed Christians must believe.

The shared list is always quite short. Anyone present is then free to suggest a new item for our shared list. For it to be added, however, everyone present must agree. After the group feels good about their work, the lesson ends.

Cox's imaginative story shows us what outsiders see while my exercise tells us what insiders say. Both help us understand Christianity.

These draw us close to what is at the heart of our religion. This morning's Scripture reading completes that journey.

Jesus is asked an impossible question: which of the commandments is most important? . . . Which commandment? Isn't the obvious answer that they are all equally important?

Most of us learned the 10 Commandments in childhood. Could we recall them now? Most Americans cannot. In fact, a few years ago a survey found about twice as many people could list all the ingredients in a Big Mac as could name all ten of the commandments.<sup>3</sup>

But when Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment of all, did his mind search a list of 10 or was his list far longer? The Hebrew Bible or those books we have often referred to as the First Testament contain a total of 613 different laws.

My own thinking about how Jesus heard the question has been greatly influenced by Scot McKnight, a contemporary expert on Jesus who wrote a book about this morning's reading a decade ago that has gone through multiple reprints: *The Jesus Creed*.

Trying to think how Jesus might have heard the question and started to formulate a reply we must remember that Jesus was an observant Jew. Since childhood he had done what all Jews did: he had recited the *Shema* several times a day every day. *Shema* is the Hebrew word for hear, which is the first word of what served as his Jewish creed.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.<sup>4</sup>

So when Jesus prepares to answer his questioner, he starts with the very familiar words of Deuteronomy 6: the *Shema*. Put differently, he offers a predictable answer: we should love God by living the Torah - by living God's law.

But, Jesus doesn't stop there. He amends the *Shema*, adding Leviticus 19:18 to create what McKnight calls the Jesus Creed. The addition is as powerful as it is succinct: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

With those five words, Jesus changed everything.

McKnight writes, "As a normal Jew, spiritual formation for Jesus begins with the *Shema* of Judaism. But Jesus revises the *Shema* in two ways: loving others is added to loving God and loving God is understood as following Jesus."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Melanie Smith. "Can You Name All 10?"

<<http://archive.decaturdaily.com/decaturdaily/religion/071027/ten.shtml>>

<sup>4</sup> New International Version.

<sup>5</sup> Scot McKnight. *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others*. (Paraclete, 2004), p.1.

Let's be honest. All of the followers of Jesus will never agree on a list of shared beliefs or Christian behaviors. We must, however, have a united vision – a common creed.

As soon as I say the word creed, I know some of you will suggest that this is an impossible way forward because you do not believe any creed can unite. My own religious background includes congregations that made it their practice to say that there is no creed but Christ.

Others of you are comfortable with creeds. Some may think that the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed or some other well known creed is capable of bringing Christians together. Part of my story suggests this as well. I even served in a denomination that has its own book of confessions, which contains many creeds.

Whether you value creeds or hold to the ideal that there is no creed but Christ, the Greatest Commandment is for you. The Jesus Creed is Christ's creed. This Lent is an ideal time for you to make it your creed and for us together to make it our creed.

This morning I want you to listen to it again. Actually, I want you to do more than simply listen - I want you to really hear it. Perhaps you will go so far as to say it at the start of each day throughout the season of Lent.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'

The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Call it the Greatest Commandment.

Call it the center of Christian formation.

Call it the Jesus Creed.

Whatever you call it:

be sure you learn it

and

be certain you live it.

Amen.