

The Jesus Creed  
Advent Lutheran Church  
August 25, 2024  
Mark 12:28-31

For nearly a decade, I served as an adjunct professor. Every semester I taught a survey course in world religions for students who were not religion majors. Each new group of students quickly became aware that while many possessed basic knowledge of their own religion, they knew almost nothing about other religions.

You can relax as I'm not here this morning to quiz you on your knowledge of major world religions. Instead, I'm interested in what folks outside of our religion think about Christianity.

And, since any one story told from the perspective of a specific religion is quite limiting, I've decided to share a story told by the great American theologian Harvey Cox.<sup>1</sup> In this imaginative tale, Dr. Cox explores 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

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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>

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 . . .

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 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>

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 some of my own experiences.

There is one activity I often use to help Christians work through what Christianity is all about. I have facilitated it in churches of varying denominations and sizes.

This is how it works . . . Those gathered divide into small table 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. When the allotted time is up, the small groups report their findings to the larger group. The lists tend to be short. Some groups confess that their list is non-existent because the group was unable to agree on anything.

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

This learning activity doesn't end there. Next we compare all of the small group lists, and place any items that appear on every list on a new list. This new list represents what everyone present agrees Christians must believe.

The larger the group size, the shorter the final list. At this point, anyone is free to suggest a new item to add to the list. For it to be added, however, everyone must agree. When the group feels nothing more can be added, the lesson ends.

Harvey 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 Gospel 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 quite well during confirmation. Can you 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 race to that list of 10 or a much longer list? The Old Testament actually contains 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 and the author of a book that with the same title as this sermon: *The Jesus Creed*.

McKnight suggests that our attempts to think about how Jesus might have heard this question need to begin with the realization that Jesus was an observant Jew. Since childhood he had done

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<sup>3</sup> Melanie Smith. "Can You Name All 10?"  
<<http://archive.decaturdaily.com/decaturdaily/religion/071027/ten.shtml>>

what all Jews around him did: he recited the *Shema* several times a day every day.

*Shema* is the Hebrew word for hear, which is the first word of Scripture that functionally 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>

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

Now, admittedly, the Jesus Creed isn't an official creed of the ELCA and it never will be. These verses of Scripture are most often referred to as the Greatest Commandment.

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.

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

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

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.

And, as we all live this out together, let us create a world in which Christians are known by our love.

Amen.