

When I was a little kid, most of my time was spent outside playing with my siblings or reading a magic treehouse book in my wooden fort in the backyard. But sometimes, our parents would let us watch an episode of TV. I loved that time - and not the TV time where I overheard Grandmamma watching Wheel of Fortune while she made dinner or stole peanut butter crackers from my dad while he watched another episode of Star Trek. No, the time I loved was when I got to watch my own shows - shows made for kids. I had my go-to shows like Franklin, The Big Comfy Couch, and Arthur, but my favorite show was Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. I loved his routine of donning a sweater and changing his shoes. I loved his soothing voice and his funny little puppets. But most of all, I loved what he had to say, the things he had to teach us. There were so many episodes, so many songs, but one that I will always remember is Many Ways to Say I Love You. It goes like this:

There are many ways to say I love you  
Many ways to say I care about you  
Many ways, many ways, many ways to say  
I love you.

And my favorite verse of the song is not the one about cleaning a room, which is no surprise if you know me well, it is the verse about what seminary taught me to call a 'ministry of presence.'

There are many ways to say I love you  
Just by being there when things are sad and scary  
Just by being there, being there  
Being there to say, I love you

In one episode where he sings this song, he follows the tune with this: "As you grow, I trust that you are finding many more ways to show and tell people that you love them. Those are the most important things that you'll ever learn to do. Because loving people, and animals, and the world we all live in is the most important part of being alive."

In a way, Mr. Rogers taught the greatest commandment - the one that Jesus said was the most important in our scripture for today from Mark. So if you have your bible, I invite you to turn to the Gospel of Mark. We'll be reading from chapter 12, verses 28-34.

This text comes after religious leaders in the temple were trying to trick Jesus with their questions. He, of course, answers in clever ways that subvert their intentions and expectations. And then, we read that someone else approaches Jesus with a question - and not a question to trick him this time, but one to solidify his impression of Jesus's wisdom. That's where we pick up - 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.

To love. That is the greatest commandment. And Jesus isn't pulling these commandments out of thin air - he is reciting from the Hebrew scriptures. The first commandment is from the Shema, which is a passage of scripture that is still recited daily by persons of the Jewish faith. It comes from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 but Jesus adds to it - not only are we to love God with all of our heart and soul and strength, we are also called to love God with our mind. Jesus adds to his response yet again by citing a second scripture, this time from Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." And if you're thinking, "I don't remember those from the 10 commandments..." you would be both right and wrong - while these commandments are not explicitly named among the 10 given to Moses, those 10 fit into the description of loving God and loving neighbor quite nicely. Plus, the bible has lots of commandments - many more than just the 10 in the familiar story. In fact, the Old Testament has 613 commandments in total. Don't worry, I didn't count them myself as I am very bad at math, including counting - I just looked it up and benefitted from the work of dedicated Rabbis.

So out of 613, Jesus chooses these: to love God with all you are and to love your neighbor as yourself. And like John Mayer says in that song, "Love ain't a thing, love is a verb." I am fairly good at English and passable with my biblical Greek and Hebrew so I did check that out for myself and am pretty confident I can be trusted in my conclusions. But really, we don't need grammar to know that love is an action, not just a feeling. We

find it to be true all over scripture - especially in the life of Jesus. Love is embodied, it is lived out. And Jesus isn't the only one who sets a great example of such great love.

Today, we are celebrating All Saints Day. Today we remember saints like Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Teresa, Harriet Tubman, Francis of Assisi... public figures known for their love lived out. We remember Saints close to our own hearts as well - especially those who have died this past year. I remember my mentor and friend, Melissa Browning. We remember together the members of this church we lost this year. And you remember the saints in your own lives - both those departed and those that still bless us with their lives and presence.

So what is a Saint? Who is a Saint? I got a good laugh from an article I read by a retired PCUSA Pastor named Donald Stake who writes, "When I was growing up, I did not particularly aspire to sainthood, at least not as I understood it. For one thing, to be a saint, I thought, you had to be dead, which had no appeal for me. Then you had to have lived a life of super piety and purity, which was clearly beyond my grasp. Finally, you had to be voted into the exclusive club of those permitted to use "St." before their names, an election I could never win." He goes on to say that in time, he learned that there was another way to look at sainthood: the biblical way. In the New Testament, the word saint refers to any or all of God's people.

And as God's people, we are called to live lives of love. That commandment gives us a lens through which we can read all of scripture, for it tells us something beautiful and meaningful about the divine. It tells us what Jesus, God embodied in human form, prioritized as paramount. Love. And that love to which we are called is twofold while also one and the same - to love God is to love your neighbor and to love your neighbor is to love God. And while I do believe that when Christ said to love your neighbor, he was talking about all of humanity, all the saints, I also believe that the call is incredibly specific. We are called to love everyone, yes, for all people are our neighbors in a sense. But not only can that be overwhelming, it can sometimes feel impersonal. We don't need to cross state lines to love our neighbor. You can love your neighbor here and now. Your neighbor on your block, your neighbor in this city, your neighbor sitting next to you in the pew! And though it can sometimes be a bit harder, you can love your neighbor on the other side of the political aisle and you can love your neighbor who doesn't mow their grass often enough, and if you try really hard you can even love your neighbor who lets their dog poop in your yard and doesn't clean it up.

And I know that you can love well because I've seen it, I've heard it, I've experienced it.

You are loving your neighbor when you make meals for someone going through a hard time - you loved Cindy so well after her knee surgery that she had to tell me not to bring her food on the day I'd signed up for because her fridge and freezer were already full of your labors of love. And I know that hers isn't the only fridge you've filled.

You are loving your neighbor when you hold their baby for a few minutes so they can take a bathroom break. You are loving your neighbor when you put food in the pantry outside. You are loving your neighbor when you send them a text or give them a call to let them know you're thinking of them. You are loving your neighbor when you ask them how they're doing and actually want to know the answer.

And in the same way, your neighbors are loving you. Every prayer shawl knitted, every mask worn in a crowded place, every casserole delivered, every hug and every smile, all of these are acts of love. And with every act of love we share, we get a little closer to the realm of God on Earth. By no means are we doing it perfectly - but I do think we're doing alright. So when you start moving out of the sanctuary and back into your everyday lives, remember those everyday acts of love. And find *your* way to live into that greatest commandment - that holy calling.

I want to leave you with one last verse of this sweet song:

You'll find many ways to say I love you  
Many ways to understand what love is  
Many ways, many ways, many ways to say  
I love you.

Amen.