

Love God, Love Others, Love Things?

by Bill Moller (a sermon transcript - Mark 12:28-34)

It would be easy; in light of Hurricane Sandy and the dark shadow she cast on our region, to fall prey to negative thinking, despair and even anger. Each of us can tell a story about the inconveniences we experienced, or the losses we've suffered, or the tragedy we've seen or overheard.

- About 150 deaths (half occurring in the US)
- Between 4.7 and 8.5 million homes and businesses lost power
- Entire communities burned to the ground or swept away with the tide
- Three hours lines for fuel at gas stations
- Supermarkets half in the dark and many shelves empty
- Estimates of \$50 billion in damages and lost business

I am reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Believers in Rome. In chapter 8 he writes:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us... We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth... We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

In times when the difficulties of life seem too great to handle, we should be reassured by these words. Paul tells us that glory will be revealed in us, that we're not alone in our struggle, and that the Holy Spirit will help us when we can't verbalize our sorrow.

There are many who will point to all sorts of causes for our suffering: Our irresponsible squandering of our natural resources that resulted in Global Warming; the sinful greed of the financial markets now powerless and submerged in lower

Manhattan; our own failures and sins; or maybe my neighbors overzealous embrace of a certain pagan holiday. (Remember that's two years in a row that Halloween has been preempted.) But, as Christians we should know better.

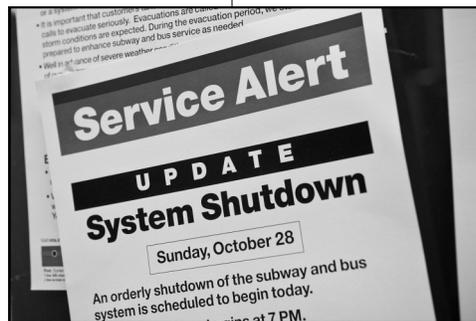
The Bible tells us that all these natural disasters are the "groanings of creation". We often forget that since the Fall - when Adam and Eve bit into that visually pleasing and tasty fruit - what happened didn't just affect people, it affected the Creation as well. This world was just a formless mass before God spoke everything into existence - and said it was GOOD. Then two naked hippie farmers, while strolling around the Garden, decided having all the trees but one wasn't good enough. They got greedy. They decided to reinterpret what God said, and chose to take the one thing they had been denied, and everyone and everything have suffered since.

In Genesis 3 God says to Adam, "*Cursed is the ground because of you.*"

After the immediate threat of the hurricane passed, much of our suffering over the past week was because we put things before God. We placed a greater value in our personal comfort than we did in our relationship with God. Our greedy desires put us in a position to suffer. We built homes just feet from the ocean's waves knowing the potential hazards. We erected the monoliths of Wall Street on a land fill just inches from the harbor. We patterned our daily routines around a virtual reality called the Internet - totaling dependent upon electricity. We chose to drive gas guzzling super SUV's that need to be fed constantly. And when all those things became unavailable or were threatened we curse Mother Nature.

Now, don't misunderstand what I'm saying. Seeking comfort or wealth or entertainment are not bad things - unless they become our first love, our god.

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Our friends in the News and Entertainment Media tend to do two things well: they make us think we need something, and they tend to over emphasize the shortcomings of being without. First we are reminded of what Sandy took from us, and then we were told how bad-off we are. Hearing that repeated over and over again can be overwhelming.

I was very fortunate. My suffering was inconsequential, but oddly enough, while I was sitting in my cold, dark apartment depending on a single candle and a warm cup of tea to comfort me, I started to enjoy the silence. Did anyone else feel that way? Or am I alone in that experience?

A very wise woman I know told me that she was listening to the radio and talking to friends and family and she decided to go into her bedroom - with no lights, no heat - to escape the negativity. She was asked "What are you doing in the dark?" Her reply was, "I'm not in the dark. I'm getting into the Light". She realized how easy it is to get caught up worrying about the things we don't have, and forget what we do have.



In chapter 8 of the Gospel of John Jesus states:

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

We get so wrapped up in our material world that we cannot imagine doing life differently. Yet, Jesus is telling us that there is another way.

My story probably isn't that different than any of yours. But, allow me to share a little bit about my week. Each day I tried to deal with staying warm, feeding myself and staying in touch with family and friends. Thursday and Friday I was finally able to go to work. (My boss was stranded in Hoboken with the Hudson River still surrounding parts of his building even on Wednesday.) Some of you know that I help manage the computer network for Kinnelon Public Schools. We were very fortunate - suffering almost no damage to the schools. I was fortunate, and was

able to get the network running despite lines being down all over Kinnelon.

By Friday afternoon I was starting to grow weary, and I headed home. I stopped at the A&P which was on generator power, nothing in the dairy section, no meats or frozen foods. Entire sections of shelving were empty. Pictures of the Moscow grocery stores in the 90's - when the Soviet Union was collapsing financially - were flashing through my mind's eye. I imagined fights over who got the last loaf of bread. When I got home, I settle into my dark cold apartment, and pondered the situation. I asked myself, "What if this goes on for a while?" I looked at my dark television, my useless computers,

my empty refrigerator, my silent stereo, my cold toaster - I noticed that there was no magic in my microwave, no aromatic perk in my coffee maker, no warm air coming from my hair dryer, and my electric razor had stopped buzzing. I'm sure you all have similar tales of woe - and worse.

Friday evening around eight o'clock I had just received a garbled cell phone call from my sister who lives in Washington DC - she and our mother were fine. She had been filling me in on the news of the day. She talked about the deaths in Staten Island and elsewhere, and damage to homes and commercial buildings, and gas lines and the hospital evacuations. And then she mentioned that looting was becoming an issue in some communities. After we said our goodbyes, I leaned my head back and looked at the flickering glow of the candlelight on the ceiling, and I thought, "What next?" I was starting to feel overwhelmed by it all. Without realizing it, I found myself praying for guidance, and comfort.

At that exact moment, when I realized the problems that surrounded me were indeed beyond my control and that my worries were all based in the loss of the creature comforts I had come to expect, the power came back on. For a few moments I sat and rejoiced in the magnificent glow that had entered my dark world. I turned on the television hoping for some good news.

What I found was channel after channel of dribble – sitcoms, detective shows, and infomercials. I remember thinking, “Don’t they know that I had just suffered for four days? How could they be showing regular programming while people are in the dark and the cold?” Then a series of images flashed through my mind – news coverage of the people fleeing the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004; the flood waters of Katrina in 2005; the starving children in the Sudan; the earthquake victims in Haiti; the civilians battered by war in Libya and Syria... the images kept coming for some time. And then, I think I heard a small voice saying something like, “Those people felt the same way as you.” Why is this happening? Why isn’t help coming?

There I was sitting in my comfy chair. My Bible was open on my footstool, along with a pad and a pen. I knew I would be preaching this Sunday, God willing. I had a Bible commentary at my side and a little flashlight next to it. All week I had been looking at the passage of Scripture that was scheduled for this Sunday. Mark 12:28-34 – a pericope (a section) entitled “The Greatest Commandment”.

I began to focus my thoughts on the task at hand, actually writing my sermon. As is my practice, I wanted to know what the context was for this passage – what circumstances led the Scribe (the teacher of the law) to ask Jesus the question, “*Of all the commandments, which is the most important?*”

Last week Pastor Andy spoke about Blind Bartimaeus – a passage at the end of chapter 10. For some reason the RCA lectionary jumps over chapter 11 in the Gospel of Mark and lands on today’s passage. In the chapter they pass over we read about Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (what we call Palm Sunday), and how Jesus clears the Temple – overturning the tables of the money changers and those of the sellers of sacrificial doves. It is here that Jesus accuses the Jewish leaders of turning the Temple into “a den of robbers”.

After that the “chief priests, the scribes and the elders” are not happy and begin a sort of tag-team

approach in a volley of questions for Jesus. First they question his authority to do the things he is doing.

Next, a different group tries to outwit Jesus with trick a question. The Pharisees (a sort of right-wing political group of religious leaders) and Herodians (the followers of King Herod – who were part of the puppet government controlled by Pontius Pilate) attempt to get Jesus in trouble with the Romans by asking if it’s right to pay taxes to Caesar.

A third group, the Sadducees, quote a passage from Deuteronomy that says if a man dies and leaves his wife childless; it is his brothers’ obligation to marry the widow. In an apparently tragic series of seven marriages and seven deaths, they want to know whose wife the woman will be after the resurrection. Keep in mind the Sadducees don’t even believe in the resurrection. They are trying to trip up Jesus.

Finally, a lone Scribe comes to Jesus and asks the big question – “*Of all the commandments, which is the most important?*” The response Jesus gives is as profound today as it was 2000 years ago. First, he quotes from the Shema, a Jewish statement of faith taken from Deuteronomy 6:4:

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

This is a declaration of monotheism - that Israel should have only one God. Here we are reminded not to place anyone or anything before our devotion to God. When we are tempted to shift our priorities, we need to reconsider our choices.

Jesus then summarizes the rest of the Ten Commandments in his next statement saying, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*”, and “*Love your neighbor as yourself.*”

Heart, soul, mind and strength. We could spend hours talking about what loving with each of these really means. Suffice it to say, we are to love God with all of



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our being. Our love for God needs to be our highest priority, and should be our primary focus. Our love for God should be the scale with which we weigh our decisions and the benchmark by which we measure of progress. And, our love for God should be the motivating force behind how we treat and care for others.



It is so easy to allow the world around you to influence you, or even control you. Difficult circumstances, the self-serving Media moguls, and even our own frailties and preferences can easily sway us. It's amazing how quickly we can toss aside our first love in favor of a mindset that places THINGS at the top of the list. It is so easy to forget WHO holds the real authority in this world and that our future lies beyond this temporal world in a Kingdom that functions very differently.

The trials and tribulations we are experiencing here and now are real. There is no question about that. We don't want to burry our heads in the sand and pretend none of this matters. But, we also don't want to be self-absorbed – focusing only on our comfort and needs. We, as individuals and as a church, need to look beyond ourselves, beyond our congregation, and beyond our little building and focus on loving God and others. I suppose that looks like a daunting task, with all that has happened recently.

I'm reminded of Jesus' words in John 16. Speaking to his disciples, he had warned of a time when they would be scattered, and even killed, and he tells them that a time will come when they will "see him no more". They were used to Jesus resolving all their issues, but he was warning that his influence in the circumstances

around them may not be obvious, but they were to trust that he was in control and would eventually return to them. To comfort them he said:

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

We just experienced a terrible week, and we don't know what this next week has in store for us. What Jesus is telling us in Mark 12 is that we need to get our priorities straight. Much of what we love about this life is just temporal THINGS. What really matters is that we Love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and love others as ourselves.

When we find the struggle to make sense of all this too much to handle – when hurricanes, loss of property, suffering and all the rest robs us of our peace of mind – I think we need to remember the Greatest Commandment and the comfort of Jesus words in John 16:33 – *"take heart! I have overcome the world."*