

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“First Things First”
Mark 12: 28-34
March 6, 2016

In college my friends and I would drive out to Stockton Lake, about 30 minutes outside of town in the middle of nowhere. Sometimes we'd just build a campfire and hang out until the middle of the night and then drive home. Other times we'd stay all night.

We might even bring our sleeping bags, but we never got that much sleep. Because something about being 20 years old makes you think sleep is a waste of time...

I remember being up by the campfire late one night, telling stories, roasting marshmallows, doing a whole lot of nothing. It must have been around 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning when I realized a few of our friends had walked down to the lake.

So, I left the fire with my flashlight in hand and followed the path away from the fire, through the trees, down the side of the hill, to the rocky beach, where my friends were.

Once I found them, I turned off the flashlight... looked up, and saw it for the first time in my life.

I had seen beautiful bright starry nights on occasion before this. I'd been camping in the country before. Something about those nights, away from the city lights, always make me want to crane my neck back and look at the vastness of the stars... stretching from one horizon to the next... like a dome of mystery and beauty.

But I had never seen anything quite like this before. Flowing through the middle of the vaulted night, was something like a river of stars... this ribbon of light through the sky where the brightness of countless stars seemed to flow.

“It's the Milky Way,” my friend said.

I had no idea it was something you could actually see in the darkest hours of the night... Of course I knew our solar system is part of the Milky Way Galaxy, but for the first time... I saw with my own eyes how our galaxy got it's name. It looks like this river of milky light.

And there's something overwhelming about looking up into this vast dome of stars and realizing that our planet is part of a small little solar system, that is flowing in this same river of light... We're part of this same unique galaxy...

And then to remember that all this vastness that I'm seeing... this galaxy that I'm glimpsing for the first time, is just one small galaxy in a universe abundant with galaxies.

And you bring all of that (universe, and galaxies, and solar systems, and planet) back down to this one small square foot where you're standing... and you realize just how small you are...

Your one life, that you experience as the center of the world, the center of existence... is so very small... and at the same time part of something so very vast. And a sense of awe, and wonder is stirred in you.

I think I've only seen the night sky like that maybe one other time in my life. But I haven't forgotten it. The experience of it, the grandeur, the reverence it evoked... it was one of the most beautifully surprising things I've ever experienced.

I've spent a lot of time this week thinking about what Jesus says is the central to our lives. *"Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind and with all your strength."*

According to the Rabbis, the Torah, the sacred Law, contained about 613 commandments. As you might imagine, keeping all those commandments straight can be a bit of a challenge, and there are situations when one commandment might seem to conflict with the other.

So, "which is the greatest?" was an important question. It's not the first time anyone asked it.

Jesus' answer seems pretty obvious to us who have heard this countless times. If you grew up going to Sunday School then you could have answered this one, and it might even seem too obvious to waste a sermon on. Of course, we're supposed to love God, right?

In fact, most sermons on this passage will be about the second great commandment Jesus rattles off: **"Love your neighbor as yourself."** Certainly we could all use some help learning to do that better. The church has had a reputation for ignoring the second commandment along the way.

And yet, I'm beginning to wonder if we don't always do a good job of taking the first commandment all that seriously either. After all, there is such a difference between knowing the answer to the question, and living into the mystery of the answer: *"Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind and with all your strength."* How **do** we do that?

Love isn't really something you can command, is it? It's more something you cultivate.

Of course, one way we do that is learning to love our neighbor as ourselves. Maybe it's the most important way to learn to love God. But I've known some Christians that "fight" for the love of neighbor... and their "fight" looks a whole lot more like angry social activism than the Love of God.

I've seen people end up pretty dried out from all that work... because, as good and important as it all is... somehow it wasn't rooted in the source of Love.

Solely becoming a social-justice-Jesus-follower isn't enough. If it's not fed in, and drinking deeply from the Love of God... there's a good chance we'll end up angry, bitter, and doing more harm than good to the world around us.

Another we often try to cultivate this love of God is by learning more... studying the bible, studying theology, reading another book. And this is important too. The more we know about this God of ours, the more love becomes possible.

But I've also know some brilliant theologians out there, and meet enough Sunday School teacher and pastors who can tell us everything there is to know about soteriology, atonement, eschatology, or any other category of theology... but their being, their bones are as dried up and dead as the bones Ezekiel encountered in that ancient valley.

There is no love in them... because there is no mystery, no awe, no humble reverence within them.

You see, somewhere along the way, you need to stop long enough to stay up all night, look up to the sky, and be in awe.

Dostoevsky once said that “*Beauty will save the world.*” I imagine he's right. Certainly it's one of the most profound ways that the Love of God is cultivated within us.

Beauty surprises us. It catches our breath. It makes us forget our to-do list long enough to stop and see something in a deeper way. And when beauty really gets ahold of us, we start to awaken to a deeper presence that is coming to us through the beauty.

It was almost 9 years ago now. I remember being on my knees next to the hospital bed. Jessi was next to me. Maybe her arm was around me. I'm not sure. What I do remember was staring at this tiny baby, wrapped in a blanket lying on that bed.

Her eyes were wide open, looking around, taking us in.

I knew her vision wasn't working yet, but I kept wondering what could she see? What is she looking at?

She opened her tiny mouth. Maybe she yawned.

I made faces back at her.

Nothing at all was really happening, but I couldn't take my eyes off of her. I couldn't stop watching her.

It was just the three of us in the room and I said to Jessi, “**She really is the most beautiful baby I think I've ever seen. I'm not just saying that because she's our daughter. She really is...**”

I can't tell you how long that went on, but somehow it seemed like hours and it seems like a fleeting moment all at the same time. What I can tell you is that I was struck with a deep love that came from some place beyond me. And I can tell you that a little hospital room in Waco TX became the Holy of Holies that night.

Just remembering it still stirs something within me... something that you might call gratitude, or you might call reverence... something that feels an awful lot like loving God more than I had known how to love God before.

Of course, I don't think God was any more present to us in that moment than God had been our entire lives. But there was something about the beauty of that moment that helped me awaken to God who was already present to me... It's like that moment opened a portal into the love of God... and helped me to see what was already there.

It's a lot like that story of Jacob's dream. Remember the story in Genesis when Jacob stole the blessing from Esau, his brother. It sets off such a firestorm at home that Jacob has to flee for his life. And after running all day, he finally stops to catch his breath. He lays his head down on a stone, still warm from the day's sun. And he falls asleep.

You know what it's like to fall asleep when you're stressed and afraid, and you're at the end of your rope. All of that stress seeps into the most bizarre dreams. I imagine Jacob tossed and turned a good bit, until his fear-driven dreams are pushed aside by a new dream.

In this dream, a ladder is planted there in the ground next to him. And the ladder reaches up to the heavens, and messengers from God are ascending and descending on the Ladder. And then God speaks to Jacob, **"I am with you... I will never leave you."**

When Jacob wakes, he says, **"Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it."**

Beauty.... can be for us,
what Jacob's dream was for him.

In a moment we wake up and realize that God is in this place, and we did not know it. And that kind of awareness, has a way of growing within us, the Love of God.

It might happen for you at the art gallery, looking at some painting or some sculpture ...and the sheer brilliance of it all grabs ahold of you in some way that no other piece of art does.

Or it might take place while you're listening to music... and the sounds move in you and through you...

and your heart rate begins to quicken,
and something, as you listen, begins to swell within your being,
and suddenly you realize that
"surely God is in this place and you did not know it."

I hope that you've experienced that along the way. But you know you don't have to go to the art gallery or concert hall to encounter art, and beauty, and awe. They are surrounding you all the time... if you'll just have eyes to see... if you'll pay attention enough to God's presence in them.

As Barbra Brown Taylor puts it, anything can become an alter in this world.
“Regarded properly, anything can become a sacrament, by which I mean an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual connection.”¹

If you’re wondering how to begin to see that, remember that it comes fairly easy through nature for most people. So, it might be that you just need to just sit on your back porch and pay attention.

Or maybe it will strike you if you sit on the ground today and marvel at the daffodils that are breaking through the ground already and wonder how it is they know the time and the hour...

Or maybe you’ll discover new reverence and awe in a swimming pool, as you move through the water, and under the water. You can feel it flowing across every inch of your body... and in a moment you wake up to the presence of God that is always surrounding you and flowing over you.

Beauty and reverence can be found in all kinds of places if you’ll look for it and pay attention. It can be found washing the dishes of those you love... connecting your body to their body... remembering that the table is a sacred place.

And it can be found in a high school math class, when you learn about calculus and logic and can see a mystery opening in the form of numbers and equations that fill an entire piece of paper... and the more the paper filled with calculations for one problem, the more your heart swells with joy.

...I know that sounds crazy to some of you, but I’m speaking from experience here.

Beauty can be found where you least expect it to be... even in that moment when you’re gathered around your loved one’s dead body. And you’re still holding their hand. And there are tears in your eyes.

And, after a moment of sitting there, the stories... the memories begin to flow... and as you share them with the others in the room the laughter comes... and you remember what a precious gift this person’s life has been to you.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength,” Jesus says.

It’s not something to ignore. It’s the essence of everything else. It’s the beginning and ending of all spiritual life. It’s the central invitation of the bible. Which means, that maybe we need to give it more attention. It can’t be the leftovers.

¹ Barbra Brown Taylor, *An Alter In The World*, 30.

Cultivating a life of wonder, of awe... of worship, is the first and primary work of our lives... Everything else that is good and true and noble... flows from there.

But to do that really does take some time, just like friendship takes time. It's as simple as turning off the TV, and as hard as keeping your phone in your pocket, rather than pulling it out to surf your FB page in every bored moment.

I know that's hard. It is for me. But try to keep the phone in your pocket sometime. Pay attention to the world around you, and the people around you.

Be present.

Get still and quiet enough to hear your own heart beating and you might be surprised to find that the Lord is in this place and you didn't know it.

Julian of Norwich is a 14th century English mystic who was about 30 years old when she received her first vision. She was deathly ill for three days. The fourth night, a priest came to give her last rites.²

As she looked at a cross he was holding in front of her, her pain suddenly vanished. Suddenly, she was as well as she had ever been. And in that moment she saw two things:

One was the face of Jesus, with blood trickling down from the crown of thorns he wore.

The second was something so small, no bigger than a hazelnut, in her hand.

"What is it?" she wondered to herself.

"It's everything which is made," was the answer she heard.

She held the whole of creation in her hand, as small and round as a nut. Looking at it she understood three things:

God made it.

God loves it.

And God is the one who preserves it.

Well, 15 years later she was still wrestling with the mystery of that same vision, trying to understand what it all meant... when finally the answer came to her:

"What? Do you wish to know your Lord's meaning in this thing?"

Know it well, love was his meaning.

Who reveals it to you?

Love.

What did he reveal to you?

Love.

Why does he reveal it to you?

² From Barbra Brown Taylor, *Alter in the World*, 33-34.

**For love.
Remain in this and you will know more of the same. But you will never know
different, without end.”**

Paying attention to this small thing,
Julian learned that God paid attention to her.
Holding it,
she learned God was holding her.

Beloved, may your eyes begin to see... that God is in this place, that God is
holding you.

Open yourself up... and learn to “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength.*”

Let’s pray:

*O God, in the grind of our daily lives,
in the business of our schedules,
in the mundane and in the boredom...
in the simplest tasks and moments...
Grant us the grace to pay attention, to see beauty there.*

*As we come to this table today,
we’re trusting that you are here, in the most simple of elements, in bread and cup.
Awaken us now, to see that surely you are in this place.
Fill us with your love.
We ask these things in the name of the one who taught us to pray, saying... Our
Father...*

Silent Reflection:

*The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw—and knew I saw—all things in God
and God in all things. ~Mechtild of Magdeburg*