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## **The Language of Love**

Mark 12:30

I was sitting in the train station of the Northern French city of Lille. I had about an hour to wait for the train that would take me to England by way of the “Chunnel.” An attractive young couple rushed in and took the two seats to my immediate right. I could not help but hear their animated conversation. I soon learned that they were faced with a moment of crisis in their relationship. The woman was waiting for the fast train to Madrid and they were preparing for a time of separation. Then I noticed that there was something unusual about the way they were communicating with each other. They spoke English to each other but neither of them was very comfortable in English. When they started taking calls on their cell phones I began to comprehend what was happening. One fielded phone calls in French and the other in Spanish. Their romance was in English because it was the only language they both knew. English had become for them the language of love. It provided the bridge where they could meet and where a new relationship could be formed.

The letter of Hebrews was written to a people who were trying to come to terms with a powerful relationship in their lives. For the first generation of Christians in Jerusalem, the temple remained the center of their worship lives. Sacrifices were carried out in the temple on a daily basis to maintain a positive relationship between God and the human family. These Christians had not yet learned to understand their faith apart from this system.

When the Romans destroyed the temple, these followers of Christ were thrown into crisis. They wondered if their faith could survive the collapse of the temple system and the disappearance of daily sacrifices. The letter to the Hebrews invites them to recognize that Jesus Christ has made the temple unnecessary. Jesus is the bridge who transforms the relationship between God and the human family. Everything depends on our relationship with Jesus, whose life and ministry provides for us the language of love.

This is the concern that motivates the scribe who comes to Jesus in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Mark’s gospel. The scribe follows a series of questioners who are intent on setting a trap for Jesus. Jesus recognizes right away that the scribe is different. He comes out of a deeply felt need. He is looking for direction for his life. He wants to know which commandment Jesus views as preeminent.

Jesus invites the scribe to learn the language of love. He reminds the scribe of the words of the Jewish *shema*. This is the most ancient creedal statement of Israel which every Jewish child memorized. “The Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:5).” And to the *shema* Jesus added, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:31).” Jesus’ emphasis on the *shema* was a repudiation of those religious leaders who claimed that the purity of temple worship was all that mattered. Those leaders taught that saying the right words and performing the right sacrifices was all God cared about. But the language of love is not about the purity of worship. It is about a relationships with God and others that recreate our identity.

It is this relationship which lies at the heart of Remembrance or All Saints Sunday. In the Presbyterian Church we do not elevate certain special people to the status of sainthood. We believe that all those who join Jesus on the road to discipleship qualify to be remembered as saints. The question for the scribe is whether he is ready to take the risk of following Jesus on that road. Is he ready to enter a relationship that will transform his life?

One of the little known facts of Reformation history is that the teaching of John Calvin flourished for more than a century in Poland. This was a period of history when Poland was governed by enlightened leaders who granted freedom of worship to Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians. They also gave freedom of worship to Jews and encouraged them to settle in Poland. In the year 1600 there was a large community of Presbyterians in Poland. A young Orthodox priest named Cyril Lucarius served a church in Poland from 1596 to 1602. He developed a strong friendship with these Polish Presbyterians. When these friends introduced Lucarius to the writings of John Calvin his life was never the same again. Calvin gave him a new language with which to understand his faith. He was particularly captivated by Calvin's teaching on the spiritual presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. It provided him with a new way of experiencing the love of God which had always been at the center of his life.

This new language of love inspired Lucarius to begin building bridges of understanding in the polarized religious environment of his time. When he left Poland he rose to a position of leadership in Orthodox Christianity. He served as Patriarch of Alexandria and then as Patriarch of Constantinople. In 1629, he published a confession of faith that was greatly influenced by Calvin's teaching. But there were powerful leaders who refused to go with Lucarius onto the bridge of understanding he sought to create. He was savaged by Orthodox and Catholic critics for betraying his tradition.

Lucarius paid a heavy price for his attempt to build bridges. In 1638 he was sent to prison where he was strangled to death. But to the end of his life he forcefully argued that he could embrace Calvin's theology and still be true to his tradition. From Calvin he received another way to understand the created relationship on which his life was based. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength...and you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12:30-31)."