Anyone who’s been subjected to my preaching for any length of time will recognize today’s reading from Mark as one of my two favorite sayings of Jesus. The other is Matthew 5:45: God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Just so you won’t be distracted by pondering, “What’s the other one?”)

Today Mark’s account of wht we have come to know as the summary of the law is paired with the first commandment as it appears in Deuteronomy.

One difference between the two is Jesus’ addition of “all your mind” to the list of ways we are meant to love God: heart, soul, mind, and strength.”

All three of the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—contain some version of this encounter between Jesus and a questioner (or examiner, or challenger). All three include his addition of “mind,” which I think suits us Episcopalians just fine.

The scribe in Mark’s account seems to approve also, as he commends Jesus for his answer to the question, “Which commandment is the first of all?” He even repeats Jesus’ mention of “mind” by saying “with all the understanding.”

Most notable, though, is that Jesus adds “The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’” going beyond the scope of the scribe’s question. He concludes by saying “There is no commandment greater than these.” He undertakes to tell the scribe, a theologian and scholar, that these two commandments sum up not only the 613 commandments of the law, but also the wisdom of the prophets.

The account in Mark is presented as a question only, as compared with the word “test” in Matthew and Luke.

Luke’s version is the most confrontational. In it a double-threat (a Pharisee who is also a lawyer) puts the question in a more pointed and personal way: “Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus answers the question as the rabbi he is, with a question: “What is written in the law? How do you read?” The lawyer of course answers perfectly, and Jesus tells him so. But the lawyer can’t leave it alone. He further asks, “And who *is* my neighbor?” Jesus’ answer to this is the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

In all three gospels we are presented with this defining moment of our faith. In all three Jesus quotes Deuteronomy, reminding his audience that he is an authentic Jew, a true rabbi.

Today’s version in Mark does this most overtly, as Jesus begins by saying, “Hear, O Israel,” the *Shema* in Hebrew. In Matthew he says that all the law and the prophets depend (in some translations “hang”) on these two.

Over time I have come to think of these dual commandments—love God and neighbor—as the lens through which we view all ethical and moral dilemmas. As we all know, many of our moral decisions are not matters of choosing the good over the bad (simple enough, though we may sometimes willfully choose the bad), but choosing between the bad and the worse or between the good and the better.

Those 613 mitzvah were attempts to cover every conceivable situation, but they inevitably fail to do so. No list—even ten times that number—could succeed at that task.

If there *could* be a law to fit every single human conflict there would be no need for courts of law.

Indeed, in the way some people think of God (not my own perspective), there would be no need for God. All of life and its complications could be resolved by looking up the solution in a book. The fact that some people try to treat the Bible in this way lis further proof that we humans long for clear, simple solutions when there is none to be had.

Whether the Constitution of the United States or Holy Writ, interpretation is always necessary when the contents are brought to bear on real-life human interactions.

*That’s* why, I believe, Jesus is challenged on this point of law. And that is why he answers with two principles that overshadow everything else:

* The standard for loving God is total—our whole being, turning our hearts and souls and minds and willpower—over to God, to the one who is greater than we are, even all of us put together.
* The standard for love of neighbor is a bit narrower in scope and closer to home: we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. I take that to mean something like putting ourselves in the other person’s position, to walk a mile in the other’s shoes. It also implies that we are meant to love or respect ourselves as part of God’s loving creative work.

The desire for certainty and moral superiority might be behind the lawyer’s final question in Luke: “And who is my neighbor?” He might as well have said, “Let’s pin this thing down, once and for all.”

Let’s face it: depending on which account, the scribe or Pharisee or lawyer might as well be Jesus’ shill in the audience, a stand-in for all of us. We all want to know, “What should *I* do? What should I *do*?” when faced with tough choices. Jesus’ answer is intended for all of us: “Love God, love your neighbor.”

Of course that answer doesn’t spell out a specific course of action for every situation, just as I’ve said, but it gives us a starting point, a lens or filter. So the question becomes, “What is the most loving thing to do?” Or, again as I’ve implied, “What is the least hurtful thing to do?”

And in the wake of that, our only best hope is to make that our prayer: “O Lord, help me! Help me to see how your love is best expressed in the light of this situation.” + + +