



Resilience: Keeping the Central Things Central

TEXT
Mark 12:28–34

April 26, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher’ you have truly said ‘he is one, and beside him there is no other’; 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.” 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.

The great American evangelist Rev. Dr. Billy Graham died two years ago at 99. When

he turned 95, he gave one of his last interviews to *Newsweek* magazine. The interviewer asked Dr. Graham to look back over his life and he did, reflecting on his travels, preaching to millions, being pastor to Presidents. Then he surprised the interviewer by saying that at 95 years old, God was still teaching him things. The interviewer asked Dr. Graham what could he possibly still be learning from God, and Graham said that God is teaching him to keep the central things central. That lately, God was teaching him that some of the things he had argued about and thought were really important, well, they weren’t that important after all. God was teaching him to keep the central things central. Then the interviewer asked Dr. Graham, what were the central things, and he answered, “Two things: love God with all that you are and love others. Those are the central things.”

What struck me then and even more now is how similar Dr. Graham’s words match with the definition for resilience.

There is lots of talk about resilience especially right now. Andrew Zolli and Ann Marie Healy, in their book titled *Resilience: Why Things Bounce*

Back, say that resilience is simply the ability to bounce back from life’s challenges. They go on to be more specific and say that resilient people, they know what is most important and they stick with it. They do not get distracted by other things that are happening around them. They keep the central things central.

So, Jesus is arguing with the religious leaders and a scribe, a lawyer, comes up and confronts Jesus and asks him “Which commandment is the most important?” You see the rabbis have quantified the scriptures and there are 613 laws. This lawyer wants to mess Jesus up by forcing him to choose one over all the others. Jesus answers him and says there are two: love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and love your neighbor as you would like to be loved. His answer stuns the scribe — so much so that he seems to have a conversion experience right then and there. He addresses Jesus as teacher, calls him rabbi whereas before he didn’t even have the courtesy to address him at all. And he says, “You are right, Teacher. These two are more important than all the others.”

Resilient people know what is most important and they stay with them. Jesus says: Love God with all that you are and love others. Resilient people know what is most important and they stick with it.

When I was in college, I became friends with Mark, another student, who came from Auke Bay, Alaska, just outside of Juneau. He invited me to come gill net fishing with him for the summer. Mark owned a little 34-foot fishing boat. The state set eight 72-hour openings when you could fish for salmon. It was awful and exhausting work, but if we did well, we could make a lot of money that would help with college.

There were three of us on the boat. Mark was the captain, Ryan was a friend of his from high school who had grown up fishing with Mark, and me who knew nothing about fishing for salmon in Alaska. We would hang this huge net in the water and wait for salmon to swim into it and get caught by their gills — hence the term gill net fishing.

It was the middle of the summer; we were halfway done. We had thrown the net out into the ocean. It was well past midnight, and it was my job to watch it and keep it taut while both Mark and Ryan got some sleep. I remember the sea was so gentle, and there were stars in the whole night sky. I could see the lights of other boats around us meaning that they, too, thought there were salmon here. I was outside the

cabin and tired and weary. I fell completely asleep, which is the one thing I was not supposed to do.

I woke up with a start because the boat was rocking so much, and I realized I couldn't see any stars anymore — which meant there were now clouds above us and the weather had changed. Then I looked around and realized I couldn't see any lights from other boats — which meant they had all left. I then looked at the net and realized I couldn't see the floats holding up the net because of the whitecaps on the ocean.

Suddenly, Mark, who is usually this really calm and laid-back guy, slammed open the door of the little cabin and said, "Oh no! It's a Taku!" I found out later that *Taku* is the Tlingit word for "great sudden wind," and we were about 20 miles off the coast in the Gulf of Alaska, a place that was known for this phenomenon. Then Mark did something extraordinary. He went back into the cabin, grabbed this huge knife and went to the bow of the boat where the net was attached, and he sliced the net from the boat. Then he went back into the cabin and slammed the door shut and started up the engine.

I remember being astonished because a net costs several thousands of dollars, and he just gave up our net. I went to the door, and he had locked it so I could not get in. I started knocking, asking, "Um, Mark, should I be out here or should I be in there with you and Ryan."

Then Mark saw me and came to the door, opened it and — I'll never forget this — with one hand he lifted me up over the lip of the door and brought me into the cabin, then slammed the door shut and locked it again. I remember being so impressed because he was kind of a scrawny guy, and I was like, "Mark, I did not know you could do that! Dude, have you been working out?" Obviously, I was completely missing the point.

Then he looked at me, and I saw terror in his eyes. Now I am not the brightest of God's children, but I got that we were in trouble when I heard Mark on the radio start calling, "Mayday!" I remember when we were at the crest of a wave, the noise of the wind and the water crashing against the windows of our little cabin on our little boat. When we would bottom out in the trough of a wave, all I could see was a wall of green all around us. It seemed to go on for hours, and the whole time Mark was on the radio calling, "Mayday" and talking to other boats who had found safety in an inlet or bay. Then suddenly it all stopped, and I looked up and saw this huge trawler.

It turns out that the captain of this trawler had responded to Mark's distress call. I found out later he was asking for Mark's full name and Ryan's and my name because he didn't think we were going to make it, and he wanted to be able to report our names to the Coast Guard. Mark kept talking to

him and refusing to give him our names. He was telling him to shine his huge lights into the ocean. When we got the crest of a wave, Mark would do a 360 and search for the light. Then he would turn our little boat toward that light. We would go deep into a trough and Mark would wait. Then when we would crest again, he would do the same thing. He would do a 360 and find the light and turn toward it. That was his one purpose. That's how we survived.

Resilient people know what is most important and they stick with it. They do not get distracted by all the other stuff that is going on. Literally in the midst of the storm, Mark knew his purpose: to find the light. And he stuck with it. He didn't let the wind or the waves or the doubts of the other captain or my or Ryan's crying and saying we are all going to die distract him.

613 laws: A lawyer tries to trick Jesus and say which one is most important. And Jesus says there are two. When you look at Jesus' life and ministry ... and even his death and resurrection ... it's all about loving God with everything and loving others as you want to be loved. When you do, you are not far from the kingdom of God.

In these days, let that be our prayer: that we would not be far from the kingdom of God.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.