

Credo Ut Intelligam; Life In The Pumpkin Patch

Mark 12:28-34

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One of the Scribes came near
and heard them disputing with one another,
and seeing that he answered them well, he asked Jesus,
“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 that ‘God is one,
and besides God there is no other’;
and ‘to love God 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.

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October 31, 2021

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

This morning, in an effort to make “The Dreaded Stewardship Sermon” a little less dreadful, I would like to audaciously offer a contrast and comparison between magical thinking and faith. Further, given that today is Halloween (and our Great Pumpkin Parade) I’d like to use Charles Schultz’s 1966 TV special “It’s The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown” as the *modus operandi* of our inquiry. If you have never seen the show, or haven’t seen it in a very long time, I might suggest you do so if only for the delightful effect of lifting one’s Halloween spirit.

II.

As a refresher, here is the synopsis of the story:

Charlie Brown is excited to be invited to his first-ever party, Violet's Halloween party. Before the party, the Peanuts gang plan to go trick-or-treating, with Snoopy, who is dressed as the WWI flying ace, taking his Halloween persona to an extreme. The one person who won't be joining them for either the trick-or-treating or the party is Linus, who will be waiting in his local pumpkin patch for the arrival of the Great Pumpkin. Linus believes that the Great Pumpkin rises out of the most sincere pumpkin patch, none more sincere than his own, flies into the air, and delivers presents to all the boys and girls around the world. Because of his belief, Linus is a laughing stock among his friends. Sally, though, is torn between going trick-or-treating for the first time and attending Violet's sure-fire fun Halloween party, or following her love Linus in waiting for the Great Pumpkin's arrival in the pumpkin patch.

III.

Of course, Charlie Brown, Peppermint Patti, Lucy, Schroeder, Marcie, Franklin, Pig-Pen, Sally and Woodstock, along with all of us here, recognize that Linus’ belief in The Great Pumpkin is a quintessential example of magical thinking. Magical thinking is when a person creates their own reality which is

detached or devoid of any connection to the *actual* reality we all understand ourselves to share.

Another example of magical thinking is when you take a black magic marker to a map showing the path a hurricane followed and widen it to include a region that the hurricane never actually affected; and, then, believing because you did so you actually altered time and space only no one realizes it but you. (*Why do you think they're called "magic" markers?*).

Whereas the French philosopher, mathematician and scientist Rene Descartes once postulated, *Cogito, ergo sum*, "I think, therefore I am," the magical thinker supposes *Opinor ergo* or "I imagine therefore it is."

IV.

If we are being honest, though (and I'd like to think we *want* to be honest) Linus gets a bit of a bum rap for his belief in The Great Pumpkin. Is a fat guy squeezing down a chimney to bring toys made by elves at the North Pole to every good little girl and boy in the world all in the span of one night any more plausible? Or, a bunny breaking-and-entering homes to hide baskets and hard-boiled eggs behind sofas that much more feasible? Or, since we are on the subject, is the belief in the divinity of a poor carpenter dying on a cross to bring the gift of salvation to the children of God a more credible belief system than Linus waiting in a pumpkin patch on Halloween night for the Great Pumpkin to deliver gifts to the children of the world?

V.

Just as we believe it reasonable for the Peanuts gang to doubt the faith Linus possesses in the existence of the Great Pumpkin, and the aging process tempers our convictions with regard to certain annual visitors to our homes, there are an awful lot of people who subscribe to Karl Marx's opinion of religion as they witness you and I enter the opium den on the Park each week, and offer our time and treasure throughout the year to keep the hookahs trimmed and burning. Again, if we are being completely honest, faith looks an awful lot like magical thinking depending on where you are sitting. But, when you are sitting in the pumpkin patch like Linus on Halloween night, or like all of you every Sunday morning sitting here in the pews or your couch at home, such magical thinking feels more real than anything we've ever known.

VI.

Today's scripture reading, Mark 12:28-34, is an effort to "get real" about religion. Here we find a Scribe questioning Jesus, asking, "*What commandment is first of all?*" In ancient Israel, Scribes were learned people whose profession was to study the Law, transcribe it, and write commentaries on it. They were also hired on occasions when the need for a written document arose or when an interpretation of a legal point was required. Scribes were meticulous and serious people, both by trade and, almost certainly, by disposition. We may safely assume, therefore, that Scribes were not predisposed to any form of magical thinking whatsoever.

In the New Testament writings, we often find Scribes mentioned in the same breath as Pharisees; they were Jesus' chief foes and adversaries. So, we can well imagine Jesus must have really captured this particular Scribe's attention, in a good way, for him to engage with Jesus like this; at least for the moment, the Scribe was suspending his disbelief that here was the Messiah, the son of God.

VII.

Jesus answers, "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all you mind, and with all your strength.*" Interestingly, though, Jesus doesn't stop there. He immediately goes on to say, "*The second commandment is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'*" Clearly this second commandment isn't an improvement on the first. Therefore, one might assume that the second is really more of an addendum. However, before we can decide Jesus goes further, saying, "*There is no greater commandment (singular) than these.*"

Clearly, Jesus wants to stress that Loving God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, is in no way distinct from loving your neighbor as yourself. There is no thinking more magical than to imagine you can accomplish the first without undertaking the second. And, so, rather than attending Violet's party or going trick-or-treating, Sally decides to sit with Linus in the pumpkin patch.

VIII.

There are, of course, many metaphors for the life of faith. However, none are more edifying, in general, or poignant, in specific given it is Halloween, than Sally and Linus sitting in the pumpkin patch. Whereas Linus might very well be there because of magical thinking or *Opinor ergo* “I imagine therefore it is,” Sally’s presence in the pumpkin patch is explained by a different Latin phrase, *Credo ut intelligam* “I believe so that I may understand.” Further, I would suggest to you that this is the very same reason which brings all of us here to live and share our lives in the Pumpkin Patch on the Park.

Now, before you are tempted to believe that I, myself, am engaged in magical thinking by espousing all of these Latin phrases, I will tell you that *Credo ut intelligam* was coined by another: namely, one of the many skeletons in the closet of Christianity known as St. Anselm of Canterbury; the Italian Benedictine monk, philosopher, theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury (1093 to 1109).

IX.

Moreover, Sally in the pumpkin patch with Linus is an even better metaphor for the life of faith when we realize, that it is *love* which brings Sally there to seek to understand. While there is no getting around the fact that our belief in God as our Creator, Christ as our Redeemer and the Holy Spirit as our Sustainer would surely seem to be, at least from where *some* are sitting, a blaring instance of magical thinking, for those of us sitting here, that very same belief is the way we seek to understand ourselves, our neighbors and our life together. Frankly, I think the world could use more of that kind of magical thinking. Like Toni Tennille once famously sang (kind of): “Love, Love will *bring* us together...”

X.

And love *does* bring us together; together in joy and laughter, in our work and mission, in shared experiences and endeavors and, especially, in the kind of mutual support Sally sought to offer Linus on that Halloween night in 1966. Love does so much, and in so many different ways; ways which are sometimes weird, other times wonderful and every once in a while, if we are lucky, ways which are delicious.

This past Thursday we had our third Food For Fellowship event. Since we instituted it last year in the midst of COVID and in response to the onerous demands being placed on the families in our church with young kids, it has grown to include not only the home-bound, but, anyone who wishes a meal. All that is asked in return, is to write a few cards and send them to others in the church all toward the goal of seeking to understand each other through our faith.

XI.

It is, at once, a wonderful thing to do but also a bit of herculean thing to do. Quite honestly, it would not happen without the love we have for each other and for God. A love which caused Susan Akins, Karen Bailey, Arvilla Aldous, Linda Potter, Marilyn Rodee, Ellen MacMaster, Barb Brown, Nancey Brackett and Porter Ripicky to bake 48 dozen cookies. A love which caused Pat Mace to make, and Jean and Pat McGuire to donate, 43 loaves of bread. A love which caused Ellen Grayson, Mark Erickson and Linda Potter to make 70 quarts of soup. A love which caused the Deacons to deliver meals, and Pat Mace, Ellen Grayson, Ray and Mark Erickson, Barb Brown, Tucker Catanzaro and Linda Potter to package food and staff the kitchen all day as people came to the church for pick-up. A love which provided 47 meals to feed 116 people of the Pumpkin Patch on the Park. A very tricky treat to pull off indeed. *(Photos below).*

XII.

I'd like to end today with a quote from the show, "Its The Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown." It's Halloween Night, and Linus is speaking to Sally as they sit in the pumpkin patch: *Each year, the Great Pumpkin rises out of the pumpkin patch that he thinks is the most sincere. He's gotta pick this one. He's got to. I don't see how a pumpkin patch can be more sincere than this one. You can look around and there's not a sign of hypocrisy. Nothing but sincerity as far as the eye can see.*

Now, it is Halloween morning, and I'm here speaking to all of you as we sit in the pumpkin patch on the park and all I see when I look at this church is sincerity as far as the eye can see. For the past 24 years, at the end of each October, I've waited and watched as God has risen out of this pumpkin patch of ours in the kind of sincere caring and giving that will sustain our church financially for the next year to come. It is a sincerity born of love which

chooses to believe in God and each other, so that we may understand ourselves. *Cedo Ut Intelligam*, that's life in the Pumpkin Patch; which, by my way of thinking, is pretty magical and located not far from the kingdom of God. Amen.





