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God is One

By the Rev. Salying Wong

So, Jesus finally gets to Jerusalem. He's been on his way ever since his baptism in Galilee. He makes a big splash here, too, so to speak. As soon as he gets into Jerusalem and the temple, he overturns the tables of the money changers. It is his way of saying, "Yoo-hoo religious leaders, come out to play!" And as if on cue, the Sadducees, the Pharisees and the scribes all come out. Today, being near the temple, it is the Sadducees (the temple aristocracy) and scribes (the experts on the law) that interrogate Jesus. "Hey man, what gives you the authority to turn over our tables? I left my lunch on that table. And why are you cursing our fig trees and telling parables in which we are clearly the bad guys? Ask anyone—we're the good guys! See the Pharisees there, they are best practitioners of holiness and purity. See the scribes, experts in the law and the scriptures. And us Sadducees, we are the priests chosen by God to make the sacrifices that atone for the sins of the people. What are you? Some yokel from Galilee. It's hard to take your teaching seriously when you speak with that Galilean twang. Plus, you break holiness codes by hanging with the unclean and the sinners; you disrupt God's temple sacrifices; and you dare to teach without authority." So, they debate with Jesus. They question him about the resurrection and about paying taxes—questions they know are not only hard, but the answer could cost him his life. Rome is always listening, and she would be especially interested in what he would say about taxes.

As Jesus debates with the Sadducees, a scribe watches them. He listens to Jesus and sees that Jesus has very interesting answers. The answers are more like riddles than answers. He has his own questions. As a scribe, his most holy task has been making copies of the Torah that would be read at the Temple and the synagogues. In all his study of the Torah, in contemplating the 613 commandments in it, he has always wondered which one is the greatest. The greatest: that was always the question; that was the religious discourse of the day.

And yet, this scribe had a feeling this pursuit of the superlative, for all one's sincerity, might actually lead away from what is best. He sees how it leads to competition, judgment of others, and creating images of ourselves that enamor us so much that we worship them instead of God. He has heard a rumor that Jesus told his disciples that the greatest person in God's reign was the lowliest servant of all. Well, how about that? It's actually another riddle.

As he approaches the Sadducees in the midst of their debate with Jesus, the Sadducees see him and begin to say with glee, "Oh goodie! The smart one is here. This scribe will put Jesus in his place." But the scribe surprises them by asking a sincere question, "Jesus, I've combed over the Torah my whole life. Of the 613 commandments, which one is the greatest?"

Jesus looks at the scribe and sees that he is thoughtful. Then Jesus grows silent, bows his head, and begins to sing, "*Shema Yisrael, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echad.*" "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one." Automatically, everyone around whispers the response of the liturgy, "Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom now and forever."

Jesus says, "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."

The scribe beams with pleasure. That is how he would start that commandment from the fifth book of the Torah, Deuteronomy. He would start it at the "'Hear O, Israel', at the Shema. He had argued with his colleagues who say the commandment starts at, "You shall love the Lord your God." He was pleased that Jesus also included the Shema in the commandment to love God, "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 scribe thought the commandment to love God begins with hearing, with

opening one's ears. Let him who has ears, hear, as the prophet Isaiah said. Yet, even so, his and Jesus' position is not unusual.

What is unusual is what Jesus does next. He yokes this commandment from the fifth book of the Torah with a commandment with the third book of the Torah, Leviticus, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," making them one commandment. Jesus says, "There **is** [singular] no commandment greater than these." Another riddle!

The scribe has to sit down. He has to think about this. Jesus seems to be saying that there is one greatest commandment that is two commandments about love. The commandment has two directions: one going vertically to God and one going horizontally to neighbor. But then all sense of direction melts away and there is only the oneness of love. How? He puzzles over this, tapping his fingers on his lips. And then suddenly, he exclaims, "It's because God is one and beside him there is no other!" Jesus laughs a big laugh and says to the scribe, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

I like to imagine the scribe working out the implications of what he means by, "God is one and beside him there is no other." I imagine him saying, "This isn't mere monotheism; it is mystical union. God is one with us and we are one with God. The oneness of God is the love of God. By our oneness with God, we know God's love for us is God's very being. Therefore, without hesitation, God's love for our neighbor is the same thing. God is not subject to division nor diminishment; therefore, his love of us is never fractional. Therefore, our love for self and neighbor can never be divided." And Jesus and the scribe sing and dance together at the wonder of this, "*Shema Yisrael, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echad.*"

After he catches his breath, the scribe says to the priests of the temple sacrifices, the Sadducees, "This is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." To which the Sadducees are so offended that they wouldn't talk to them anymore. They are just told they are out of a job.

I would like to think that Jesus pulls the scribe aside and says to him, “It is because of what you now understand that I go willingly to be crucified and on the third day rise. I’ve told my disciples about what will happen to me three times now, and they do not understand. But, you are close to the kingdom. You will see all that unfolds and you will know what is the reality that upholds all that I will suffer.” The scribe nods and continues to work the mystery of God’s oneness that does not spare, does not protect, but nevertheless, does not abandon, but is always still one—so that life or death, God is never absent. And thus, the tyranny of the powers that destroy have no power over us. Hear, O Israel, God is one.

Today, we face our own set of uncertainties. We all know there’s an election going on. I’ve pondered what to give you for this week so that you can resist the diabolical forces. The word “diabolical” describes things that divide. We hear about divisions all around. Today, I’m most concerned about how our anxieties divide our sense of unity with God, which means with our neighbors and with ourselves. I would like to guide you in pondering the oneness of God this week so that you will know that ultimately, nothing can divide you from yourself, your neighbor or God.

Here I want to lead you in a meditation from James Finley, from his book, “The Healing Path.”

Close your eyes and take a breath. Take another and become aware of your body. Now take a third breath and release your body.

Now imagine you are out walking on the beach and God says, “Go ahead, pick a grain of sand, any grain.” Because God is not subject to division or diminishment of any kind, no matter which grain of sand you choose, God will be completely present—in that one little grain of sand. Furthermore, since the whole universe flows from God, is sustained by God, and subsists in God, you are holding in your hand a grain of sand which you, along with the whole universe and everyone and everything in it, is unexplainably present in that one little grain of sand...

[Now] God says, "pick a place, a situation, a circumstance in which you might find yourself." If you choose a wooded area, you see yourself in your mind's eye surrounded by trees. God is there, inviting you to reach and touch a leaf on a low-lying branch. As you do so, you realize you are touching a leaf in which the totality of God is wholly present. If you choose your home, God is there, inviting you to choose something, anything at all: the tea kettle on the stove, or perhaps a chair in a corner of the living room. No matter what you might choose, you realize you are choosing something in which God is wholly present, loving you, and all people, and all things, into being.

Then God invites you to reflect on any aspect of yourself. No matter what aspect of yourself you focus on, God is there, wholly present in each breath, each thought, each feeling, each turn of your head. You realize that as you sit, God is present as the ungraspable immediacy of your sitting. As you stand, God is present in the ungraspable immediacy of your standing. As you laugh, God is there as your laughter. As you cry, God is wholly present in each tear falling from your eyes.

It does not matter what little thing you might choose within or around you. It might just be the thing that awakens you from your fitful dream of being separate from God, who is the reality of yourself and all that is real...

May we continue on in this true awareness, seeing in each and every little thing we see, the fullness of God's presence in our lives. May we learn to be someone in whose presence others are better able to recognize God's presence in their lives so that they, too, might know the freedom of the children of God.

Amen. So be it.