

Mark12:28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard [Jesus and some Sadducees] disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked [Jesus], "Which commandment is the first of all?" **29** Jesus answered, "The first is, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; **30** 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.' **31** The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." **32** Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that "he is one, and besides him there is no other'; **33** 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." **34** 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.

A Leg to Stand On

A sermon preached by
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Text:
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My grandfather liked to tell a story about his father who had on his farm in West Virginia near where my father grew up a pig with a wooden leg. When asked for an explanation of the wooden leg, grandfather would explain that this was a very important pig to the McIntire family and that it didn't always have a wooden leg.

One evening, it seems, as the family was fast asleep the farm house caught on fire. The fire started to spread quickly, and from out in the barn this pig saw the flames coming from the house and ran to the front door, butted his way through, ran up the steps, and awakened my grandfather who then got the family safely out of the house.

"That pig," my grandfather explained," is a hero."

"Well," an unknowing stranger would ask granddad, "that's a



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great story but it doesn't explain the wooden leg. How'd that happen?"

"You know what else that pig did?," my grandfather asked, "He ran out to the field one afternoon and saved Uncle Silas after his tractor had turned over on him and he was trapped underneath. The pig grabbed his shirt collar in his snout and dragged Silas out from under the tractor and then ran to the nearest neighbor to grunt for help. That pig is a hero, alright."

"Yes," the stranger insisted, "I understand, but how did he get that wooden leg?"

"The wooden leg?," granddad responded, "Well, you can't eat a hero pig like that all at one time, now can you?"

Now, I never did believe my grandfather's story. He was just as creative a truth stretcher as my dad was and, I now am beginning to realize, I am. I suppose it's a bit genetic. So maybe my family didn't have a pig with a wooden leg ... but what I can tell you truthfully is that my father did, indeed, have a wooden leg.

As the result of a plane crash in the Pacific during World War II, his left leg was amputated below the knee. So I grew up being very confused about why other dads had two legs. My dad only had one leg, so that's what all dads should have. To see a man at the beach with two legs sticking out the bottom of his bathing suit seemed – still seems –very odd to me. What was normal for me was walking down the beach with my dad, leaning against the lifeguard stand to take off his wooden leg and lean it against the stand, and then watching him hop down to the water line and dive in. (When you have only one leg, I learned, it seems there is little hesitation about the temperature of the water. When it's balance versus water temperature, balance invariably loses.)

My memories of my dad's wooden leg are filled with every imaginable emotion. I remember dropping a little plastic Mary Poppins figurine into the hole in the side of his hollow leg and his

anger and hidden laughter in taking it off and shaking it until it came back out that little hole which was only the size of a quarter. I remember him convincing me during a trip to Florida with my high school marching band that he wanted to come down one of those tall waterslides at Water World and that I would have to follow him up and carry his leg back down the steps while he came down the slide – I remember feeling proud, not embarrassed as one might expect a teenager to feel, as I made my way down those steps with his leg under my arm. I remember the fear in his voice as he called for me to run and get my mom and take him to the emergency room the night that he felt something in the knee of his good leg tear as he was crawling into the back of our pick-up truck –how anxious it must have been for him to have his good leg temporarily incapacitated because of surgery. I remember the surprise in his face when he wore an old wooden leg on a whitewater rafting trip and when he was tossed out of the raft he discovered for the first time that his leg floated and that it had a mind of its own when it came to floating in the same direction as the rest of his body.

I could fill your afternoon with stories of my dad's wooden leg –stories about ice skating and bike riding both of which he did without any problem, or his determination to try downhill skiing although he never got to, or the 17-mile rainy hike that he led our Boy Scout troop on through Washington, DC, or the time we played volleyball and his leg popped off in midair as he jumped making his landing a bit awkward. My dad's wooden leg never slowed him down. No doubt it was sometimes frustrating and felt like a burden to him and I am certain that there were times when it caused him both physical and emotional pain, but he rarely let that show. His determination and courage and faithfulness – and his wooden leg – taught me many things.

One of the most important lessons that I learned from him and his wooden leg and that I want to share with you this Father's Day is that so long as you have faith in God and believe in what you're doing you will succeed. Maybe that sounds too much like a Ward Cleaver or Michael Brady, TV-dad cliché, but what he taught me

was that in my faith I have a leg to stand on. It's not as if he took me aside at my high school graduation party and said to me, "Son, if you're going to succeed in this life here's what you'll have to do..." I guess I learned it more subtly by watching the life which he lived and the example that he created for me to learn from.

He never complained about the things he couldn't door couldn't have. He, like Job, refused to curse God or anyone else for the loss of his leg. He always seemed to have time for me and the endless music concerts or plays or Cub Scout projects that filled my schedule. He always had time for church –not just Sunday mornings but weeknights at a Trustees meeting or Saturday morning crawling into the boiler to patch a crack so we had heat on Sunday, or each year putting up the biggest Christmas tree you could imagine in our Sunday School auditorium. And he always had time for what he thought God wanted him to do – insisting on leading us in worship at Boy Scout camping weekends, challenging those that refused to accept the appointment of a female pastor to our local church, fighting for my sister's youth group to be able to hold a Coffee House in the basement of our church in the 60's, willing to loan money to a Jamaican colleague at work who no one else would treat fairly, inventing ways to raise money for a new roof at church or to meet it's struggling budget.

A leg to stand on. There was something so fundamental to my father's faith that it taught me that no matter what happened, I could always count on God to be there with me and when that leg didn't seem like enough, I could always "lean on the everlasting arms" whenever I needed. It's taken me a few years and some real searching to understand what that fundamental piece of his faith was, but I think that I now know. That foundation of his faith was what gave him a leg to stand on in a world that would just as soon knock him off his feet.

A scribe asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?" "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" and "love your neighbor as yourself," Jesus answered. Those two are

equal in weight and importance, those two are more important than any burnt sacrifice, though they might require some other kind of sacrifice – the offering of one's selfishness and idolatrous attitudes – those two are beyond anything else that you might think God would have you do. Love of God and love of neighbor is so foundational to faith –so fundamental, if you will – that learning and living those commandments brings you "not far from the kingdom of God," says Jesus. And not far from the kingdom of God is not such a bad place to be.

Love of God and love of neighbor was the foundation of my father's faith. That's the leg he had to stand on. And that's now the leg I have to stand on.

Robert Graves in his book "King Jesus" refers to an old tradition that claims that Jesus walked with a limp. Imagine the implications of that tradition. Picture in your mind the Jesus that you know –now add to that picture a limp. Jesus makes his way around the countryside and urban areas of first century Israel walking with a limp. In a world where those with physical disability were cast aside, is it possible that this teacher had trouble walking? In a world where the powers that be look for ways to knock your legs out from under you, is it possible that the one who answered so that "no one dared to ask him another question" only had one good leg to stand on?

But there is something so central to faith in those commandments that maybe that's the only leg that Jesus needed. Love God, love neighbor. In that simple commandment there is surely a leg to stand on.

And I think that's what my dad was trying to tell me by living his life the way he did. If what I do stands on that leg – on that core principle of faith – then surely my efforts will be close to the kingdom of God and will be a faithful response to God's call. Not that I can justify every possible move I make by claiming it is for God and my neighbor –that argument has been used to try to justify the Nazi death camps and the Bosnian genocide, racism or

sexism, and every other kind of –ism –but rather that if it is truly a faithful response grounded in love of God and neighbor, then no one will dare ask another question and no one will be able to knock that leg out from under me.

You only need one leg to stand on to take on the world.

"Man with a wooden leg escapes prison," writes James Tate, "He's caught. They take his wooden leg away from him. Each day he must cross a large hill and swim a wide river to get to the field where he must work all day on one leg. This goes on for a year. At the Christmas party they give him back his leg. Now he doesn't want it. His escape is all planned. It requires only one leg."

You only need one leg on which to stand to make your escape from the prison bars of the world and to get close to the kingdom of God.

My family did not have a pig with a wooden leg. My dad did have a wooden leg. And despite the fact that he only had one leg to stand on, no one ever dared kick it out from under him. And what he did as his faithful response to God's claim on his life was undergirded by that foundation of love of God and love of neighbor – that was his faith-leg to stand on –and no one dared kick that out from under him either. All I can hope this Father's Day is that I learned correctly from him and that what I do with my life is so based on that same foundation that it will never be kicked out from under me either.

I look at my ministry and I realize that the only things that have succeeded for me are those that have that leg to stand on –those pieces of my life grounded in the love of God and love of neighbor. Standing on that leg is the only way that I have been able to be close to the kingdom of God. All else has been futile. And I look at this church and its ministry and mission and I realize that the only things that succeed are those that have that leg to stand on. Without it, the world would kick our legs right out from under us. With it, we "stand firm in our faith," as Paul says in 1Corinthians,

we are courageous, we are strong. Standing on that leg lets all that we do be done in love. (1Corinthians16:13).

My dad stood firm in his faith. Maybe he only had one leg to stand on, but he showed me the kingdom of God standing on that leg.

Amen.