

Shema—Hear! That’s the title of this sermon. This is found as the opening word of verse 4 of the text I read. As those of us who meet on Wednesday mornings tried to reach some way to discuss what happened last Saturday in Pittsburg and what seems to be happening all around us, several scriptures were mentioned as being appropriate. Many of these listed were not from the lectionary readings suggested as possible starting points for today. But to me the two selections from the complementary tract of the lectionary seemed a good starting point. I like to begin with those lectionary selected readings because I want the message to come out of the text. I don’t want the message to be used to select the text. So I have read those two passages, both of which focus on one distilled thought about God and what our relationship with God and each other should look like. At the entrance to the Promised Land Moses begins by telling the assembled people that what he is telling them contains the instructions God has commanded him to teach them. He is telling them how they are to live in the land they are about to enter and occupy. If the Hebrew language had had punctuation the beginning of this fourth verse from Deuteronomy 6, would have had exclamation points—not just one, but a series of them after this opening word given as part of Moses’ farewell address to the people of Israel. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” This is a declaration—a command emphatically given to the people that Yahweh, the Lord, alone is the one to whom they should turn, whom they should follow, whose commandments should become their way of life. No other way is to be followed. Next they are told: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” That’s pretty inclusive—even in English translations there is not room for doubt that this should be the focus of all that is done by those covenanting with God to belong to God. The Hebrew word translated as with all your heart means with all your inner self. The Hebrew word rendered as soul means all that makes up your living being, desire, and passion. And the word might which is sometimes translated as strength means with abundance and force. The intent of this injunction is that all that you are is to be devoted to the Lord God. Today’s passage goes on with this instruction from Moses: “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” In other words—at all times and in all places—this is to be the primary focus of God’s people—loving God and keeping God’s commandments. When we read the gospel text from Mark for today, it strongly echoes this earlier command. As Jesus is teaching in the Temple courtyard on the last few days of his life, there are some scribes and priests who approach him trying to trap him into something they can use against him. The last challenge is given by a scribe who joins the discussion with this question: “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.” The scribe repeats this in the affirmative adding that this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices which are made. Putting these two passages in conversation with one another makes it clear that Jesus confirms what Moses told the Israelites in the very beginning about what is important in the ordering of a life obedient to

God. The parallels in what is said is obvious, but unfortunately when it comes to following obediently into the relationship desired by God, people don't seem to be able to truly hear—they don't listen in such a way they keep these precepts in their hearts. In Deuteronomy 10: 18-19, the people are told that God is one who executes Justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." There are many times in the Hebrew Scriptures where God conveys this message that they should treat aliens/strangers well because they should remember that they once were aliens/strangers themselves. Both of our sacred texts give us instructions on how these two commandments look when lived. In Leviticus 19: 9-10, the people of Israel are told: "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your land, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God." Again in Leviticus 19: You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." In other words God says because "I am your God, your only God, you shall do these things. God's priorities are set so that being obedient to the first and most important one will lead to the one that is deemed second by Christ. To love God; to have God at the center of your life means loving others; the one follows the other. All the gospel accounts tell us that Jesus sought to minister to those on the fringes of society, those rejected by the community. He brought his message that God's reign came near through his love and his restoration of them. He told his disciples he came to serve; not to be served and that was what was also required of them as well. In the gospel of John, on that final night with his disciples we are told that Jesus gave them a new commandment—John 13:34—"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Today, my answer to the disturbing events in Pittsburg are that we need to remember that we have been claimed as God's children; that we are called to love others—and that God's definition of those we are called to love does not have a clause that adds exceptions to that number. There is no group excluded. Our Lord and Savior even included those we consider enemies. There were many conflicts within the early church as they tried to follow Christ. The evidence of that is frequently found in the letters written to those early communities. One which seems particularly apt in this context is from Ephesians 4: 29-32, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you." When I listen to the things that are accepted in the speech around us, I fear we have need of being reminded of the two things which Christ said were most important for our lives. Shema! Hear, O people of God, what the Lord desires of your life. I saw a post on Facebook this week which read something like this: We need to stop worrying so much about putting Christ back in Christmas and focus instead on putting Christ back in Christians. That is actually a much more urgent need if we are to be faith followers. Shema! Hear! Hear not just with your ears, but with your mind, with your heart, with all that you are to what the Lord has constantly told you

that is to guide you in all that you do. Even better: Not only listen closely to what God has said over and over again and let it transform you. We will move to the Table where Christ meets us in a few minutes. Come to the Table to receive nourishment. Come to the Table to gain strength and understanding to truly hear what the Lord desires of us. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.