

The scribe came near, and asked Jesus, “Which commandment is first of all?”
And of course, we all know the answer:

Hear, O Sardis, the Lord our God is One, and you shall love this Oneness with all your heart, by making casseroles and bringing them to the monthly potluck in perpetuity.

And you shall love this Oneness with all your soul, by worshipping for approximately sixty minutes at exactly eleven o’clock, 52 Sundays a year; rain or shine.

And you shall love this Oneness with all your mind, by gathering in classrooms, every Sunday or Wednesday, again, rain or shine, and systematically working your way through a set curriculum.

And you shall love this Oneness with all your all strength, by mobilizing local missions, and tithing your earnings, and winning the church softball league championship on a regular basis.

And Sardis, there’s a second, equally important commandment, you shall love your neighbor as yourself, and your documentation of hearty, soulful, mindful, strong, programmatic love will be demonstrative of neighborly affection, worthy of your Creator’s admiration.

Boxes checked. Kingdom initiated. Boom!

Long ago, the legal types, got SO fixated on applying Torah, they forgot its purpose. Torah was created to help make people aware of and empathetic toward God and neighbor. The hope was that every person would reciprocate God’s love and grace in their own lives. But as the religion grew, and the cult became formal, ritual became more important than purpose and meaning. You might even say it replaced them. Burnt offerings and sacrifices, and the application of code and law became requirements instead of invitations.

Communion with God became something to be done, instead of something to be received.

Jesus reminds his listeners, and that includes you and me today, that substance and authenticity outweigh structure. I think it's important for us to note, however, that Jesus neither endorses nor indicts structure. For Jesus, Torah is a means, but it's not an end. Jesus pleads for us to resist the desire to weaponize Torah.

The pandemic-era has forced us to reckon with our own current model of Torah. My definition of modern Torah would extend beyond our sacred texts to include all those congregational traditions, programs, and philosophies we hold dear. No, we don't offer burnt offerings, nor do we make our annual pilgrimages a requirement. But we, too, struggle to separate structure and substance. Loving God and neighbor is too often bound up in practice rather than presence.

Consider a rose bush and trellis. The trellis gives stability to the growing vine. It offers shape and form. You might even say the trellis helps some people experience the rugged and wild beauty of a rose in a more accessible way. Perhaps the newly formed boundaries also offer a bit of distance and safety from the thorns we don't want to poke us.

But nobody plants a rosebush in hopes of growing a trellis. And the rosebush is not dependent on the trellis. Even without defined shape, it has a rugged beauty, and an unyielding persistence. That rosebush is going to last long after the wooden trellis falls apart. You can walk along our property here at Sardis and see for yourself! Remnants of Mrs. Miller's Garden pay no mind to weeds, briars, or the fenceposts that once corralled farm animals.

And let's suppose our trellis wore out? Would we grieve its replacement? Or let's suppose our rosebush required different conditions – access to better sun or soil? Would we be open to constructing an entirely new trellis, or substituting a wall, or the side of the house, or even, gasp, one of those plastic,

green, garden stakes to ensure the vitality of our persistent, wild, totally-worth-preserving rosebush? Of course, we would!

Look, churches build trellises. They always have, and they always will. And whether the Church has repaired, replaced, or even abandoned its trellises, the rosebush of God has continued to thrive. 500 years ago, the printing press revised the whole Church with the Gutenberg Bible. It's not all that hard to imagine a time in the not-too-distant future when Bibles won't be printed at all, not to mention hymnals, worship guides, and newsletters. It's also not been that long ago that expressions like live music in worship, a book of common prayer, and prepared sermons were considered radical ideas.

I think the way we apply Torah in our own lives – that is the way we do and be Church – is getting ready to look a whole lot different than anything we have ever known. I think it's gonna be a completely different kind of trellis.

And even though that makes me really, really, really nervous, and anxious, and uncertain, and admittedly, even a little excited, I'm trying to remember that it's not the structure God calls us to. Instead, God calls us to engage in activities of the heart, mind, soul, and inner strength, that make known the love, grace, and power of God, and embolden us to share that love, grace, and power with all whom we encounter.

I will tell you that there are times when we haven't been too far from the kingdom in traditional structures. I have felt God's presence in Sunday School and Bible studies, because in fleeting moments, our shared joys and pains have been made known and experienced in community, and SO, SO closely and intimately. Potluck suppers have made me feel as warm inside as the casseroles on the table. The consistent rhythms of worship and song and prayer have formed a foundation of trust, confidence, and value in our little community. We should celebrate the reality, effectiveness, and reach of our Sardis Torah.

Planting a Rosebush; Trellis Optional
Bob Stillerman
23rd Sunday After Pentecost, Proper 26, 10/31/2021
Reformation Sunday
Mark 12:28-34



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

But we also need to be mindful of chipped paint, and loose nails, and the vegetation that has shifted the sunlight. And the question for us should not be, “How do we save the existing trellis, the one that helps keeps defined boundaries and shields us from prickly thorns?” The question must be, “What kind of trellis, repaired, replaced, or even reimagined, do we need to construct, in order to connect with the Oneness of God?”

The word experiment is a lot like the word barbeque – it can be both verb and noun. But unlike the word barbeque, which really is best used as a noun, the word experiment is best applied as a verb. The Sardis Baptist Church experiment is a verb: We’re the act of pursuing a myriad of ways to love God and neighbor with heart, mind, soul, and inner strength. The Sardis Baptist Church experiment is also an active people: we are a group seeking to know and love God in community. And there are times when people and verb intersect in moments that aren’t too far from the Kingdom. In the days to come, whatever the trellis we build, or don’t build, may we always strive to be an intersection of God and neighbor. And perhaps, we, too, will experience a few more of those kingdom moments that build transformative kinship.

May it be so, and may it be soon!

Amen.