

A reading from Mark:

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?" ²⁹Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you 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.' ³¹The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." ³²Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; ³³and '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." ³⁴When 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.

The Word of the Lord.

Faith used to be simple for me. Easy, piece of cake. I attended my family's church, went to Sunday School and youth group and was first a participant and later a volunteer with our Vacation Bible School program over the summers. And it's not like I was just going through the motions—some of you probably grew up in your parents' churches, too, and know what I'm talking about when I say that genuine faith, as a kid, is easy. Of course, God's holding me, of course He's with me and watching out for me. Why wouldn't he be? And you live a life of faith by following Jesus' command to love. That's all you gotta do, right? Trust and love.

It's not quite that easy anymore. Growing up has a way of doing that, of making a person ask those questions and face those doubts that as a child seem irrelevant, even ridiculous. But while I think that process can be both a good and a bad thing, I also think that faith can't grow without it. And if any period of my life has forced me to question and doubt and grow my faith, it's been these last three years at Valpo.

Now, I'm in Christ College, which meant that from day one I was shoved into a room with a bunch of other overachievers who also had opinions about things and told to discuss ancient texts about the meaning of life. I don't specifically remember any texts that flew in the face of my own beliefs and shattered my own worldview, but over time these discussions presented me with perspectives I didn't agree with, although I often couldn't quite articulate why. And even outside of CC, I think it's difficult to go all the way through college—at least at Valpo—without having some interesting conversations with peers who raise questions you don't like. Is God present, here and now, or is He just important in the context of this book we talk about all the time called the Bible? If God is present and active in our world, is it possible for Him to intervene in our lives without taking away our free will? And while we're on that, what do we even mean when we say free will? I once had a conversation in Founders with another student who was an atheist but also didn't believe in free will—that was a combination I never expected to find, but he was totally set in his worldview and ready to defend it to me. As a freshman who thought I knew what I believed and why, the fact that I was unable to defend some of my own beliefs to this other student was honestly more than a little bit unsettling. What that left me with was more questions, and not ones I particularly wanted to think about. The easy answers I had as a child didn't all quite fit anymore. And my faith wasn't only facing questions intellectually; as those of you who knew me my freshman year will no doubt remember, I was incredibly homesick. I felt so unprepared to face the unfamiliar, scary setting that was college, and I wanted nothing more than to go home and be in that safe space where I knew that I was understood and loved, rather than surrounded by so many people I didn't know. But I kept praying, praying for God to show me that He was present in that space, and He did. He surrounded me, in that unfamiliar, uncertain place, with people who reached out to me and got to know me and supported me and showed me that they loved me. God gave me hope, in that time, and a strength I didn't know I had. He showed me that He was present in that space, and so despite my questions, my faith grew.

Child me thought that whatever was thrown at me, I would know how to respond. That has been proven false many, many times, and is especially true right now. The uncertainty of being a senior in college in and of itself would be enough to have me stressed, but that's nothing

to the uncertainty everyone on this campus is feeling, now. I think all of us are beginning to realize that this is the new normal. The Valpo we left, halfway through the Spring semester, is in so many ways not the Valpo we have returned to. Many of the things I found joy and fulfillment in here have been changed, some to the point of being almost unrecognizable, and I'm sure that all of you have experienced the same thing. Now, we knew this was coming; over the summer we knew we'd have to bring some masks when we came back, that we'd be told to start taking our temperature every morning before coming to campus, and that there would be extra rules surrounding pretty much everything. But, if any of you are anything like me, you didn't fully realize the impact of all of that until you got here. And realized just how much was different. Just how much we've lost. The real meaning of that didn't hit me until earlier this week, and trust me when I say it was not a fun experience. Perhaps child me would have believed that I'd know what to do, to acclimate to these new circumstances. Child me would certainly have assumed that I'd lean on my faith and that all would be well. But child me didn't know that, when you're grieving the loss of so many things, when circumstances around you feel in many ways so isolating, that faith is harder. Much harder. But what child me also didn't know is how amazingly beautiful it is when God steps into that space of brokenness and somehow brings hope. Healing. Strength. He did it my freshman year, He did it last fall when I was terrified at the prospect of leaving everything familiar yet again and going abroad to Costa Rica for a semester, and I can already see Him doing it now. And the faith that comes from that reminder of God's presence—even if nothing changes, the problem is not fixed, but God has reminded you that He is there, that He will get you through, just like he did before—that faith is far more complicated and difficult and frustrating than the faith I had as a child. But it's also a faith that is deeper, and stronger.

So, I suppose I can't say that, over the course of my faith journey at Valpo, I've discovered the answer to all of my questions or doubts. There are still a lot of questions I don't have answers to, and while I do intend to continue wrestling with them, because I see deep value in that, I know now that the real point of having faith is not to always have the answer. And the point of faith is also not to always feel okay, as though faith somehow makes everything right. The point of faith is to trust that God is holding you, and everything around you, right here, right now, even and especially when that is so hard to see. And then faith means taking that next step, and living as Jesus calls us to: in love, always, even when we don't have the answer. And I think that was the question the man in our scripture was asking: Jesus, I don't have the answer. There are a lot of different opinions out there about what living a life of faith means, and honestly, it's overwhelming. It causes division between people who think they have answers to these questions. And I don't know what's true. Jesus could have responded with a specific answer—these people are right about this, those people are right about that, etc. But he doesn't. He responds simply by saying that Love is the most important, for God and for neighbor. It is this love that we are called to when we live lives of faith—the love that lifted me up and showed me God's presence and touch of healing freshman year. The love that drives our Chapel community, in the midst of a pandemic, to work with all of these restrictions and create to the best of our ability a community in spite of it all. That is the love of God.

And you know what? I think child me could have told me that. Of course, it's about having faith in God and loving those around us. Love is what Jesus talks about, it's like, his whole thing. That's why having faith like a child is important: you can trust in truth even when you haven't seen it, and often I think child faith gets that truth right. But big kid me—like, college senior, about to graduate me—the me that knows there are a lot more questions than answers available to us in this crazy place we're stuck in called human existence—that me wouldn't go back to being the child version of me, even if I could. Because when faith is tried, it is strengthened. Faith that has been tried knows what it means to lean not on my own understanding, for my life is in the hands of the maker of heaven, as we sang earlier. So let us live in faith, trusting God to hold us and give us strength even when we feel our weakness most acutely. Let us trusting in God even when we don't have the answers. And, above all, let us keep loving each other. Amen.

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