*Gracious and loving God*

*You call us to be stewards of your*

*Abundance, the caretakers of all you have entrusted to us*

*Help us always to use your gifts wisely*

*And teach us to share them generously*

*Send the Holy Spirit to work through us*

*Bringing your message to those we serve*

*May our faithful stewardship bear*

*Witness to the love of Jesus Christ in our lives*

*Refresh us so that we may honor his great name.*

*Amen*.

Good morning! Good morning at home!

When I was a lowly assistant priest, I idolized my rector. He always preached a solid sermon. He took great care of the folks at the parish. He took great care of his clergy. But in the years I spent learning from him, my favorite aspect were the jokes. They were bad. Like dad joke bad. And we always knew that the punchline would be followed by a belly laugh. And Father's favorite joke would always come up whenever Jesus came across the Sadducee's in a Gospel reading. And since our lesson from Mark stars one such individual, I thought I'd inflict I MEAN share that joke with you this morning. Ready?

Why were they called 'Sadducees'? Because they didn't believe in the resurrection, so they were 'sad-you-see'.

Don't worry it will only hurt for a short while. And while the joke is a real groaner, it is actually kind of a helpful reminder why Jesus would be at odds with the Sadducees. After all, as the New Testament, the teaching of the Church, and the worship of the saints across time attests, resurrection is pretty much what Jesus is about. And there were other notable disagreements that Jesus had with the Sadducees, especially about how to read, interpret, put into practice Israel's scriptures. Interestingly, Jesus had much more in common with the Pharisees in that regard. But even if there were lots of disagreements across the board of first century Jewish religious authorities, they all mostly agreed that the among the most important biblical texts, certainly among the most important texts in the daily lives of pious and observant Jews would have been the text that Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Often called the *Shema*, this is a foundational text to Israelite covenant identity. And according to the overall narrative and logic of the Old Testament, this identity was rooted in God's call and purpose for an entire people. And to encourage Israel's covenant identity and fidelity to it, the *Shema* has been part of Jewish daily prayers in ways roughly analogous to the Lord's Prayer or the Apostles' Creed in our own Daily Office observance. And just like both of those basic aspects of Christian spiritual life, the *Shema* is laden with deep theological truth, efficiently expressed as well as profound relational implications for how God's people were to respond to Him.

All that was in play in today's Gospel lesson, when a scribe (or perhaps Bible teacher or Bible pro) heard the Sadducees arguing over some Bible stuff and took the occasion to see what Jesus thought. "What's the most important thing God tells us to do in the Scriptures," the scribe asked. Jesus replied with that foundational text. He let the scribe know that Jesus believed in the uniqueness of the One God of Israel, and that Israel was meant to love and serve that unique God with every part of themselves: heart, soul, mind, and strength." Like many rabbis before him, Jesus also summarized the ethical requirements of Israel's covenant in his comment that the second most important thing God tells us to do in the Scriptures is to "love your neighbor as yourself." The Sadducees and other opponents besides were always ready to take Jesus to task for his teaching, so you can imagine that once he started to respond to the scribe's questions that the whole area quieted down to hear him. The scribe, for his part, gave Jesus a positive review. Echoing the psalms and the prophets, he added that fidelity to those commands was more important than the offerings and sacrifices meant to work as an atonement for sin. Jesus in turn gave the scribe his own positive review: "you are not far from the kingdom of God," he said to the scribe. The Sadducees and others around them were apparently blown away by this conversation as they had nothing else by which to challenge him, at least as far as Biblical interpretation was concerned.

Jesus' theological sparring partners could not deny that Jesus meant for his followers to be obedient to God's ancient call on their lives. But notice that Jesus didn't say to the scribe that he was inheriting the Kingdom, but that he was not far from it. I wonder if what kept the Scribe juuuuust out of Kingdom bounds (at least as far as this conversation was concerned) was that the greatest commands of God remained more an agent of legality and not as much an agent of new life. Especially for the Sadducees, these commands stood as a way for people to maintain a sort of human-divine handshake; an arrangement that kept the relationship between humans and God cordial and respectful. But Jesus was moving his disciples beyond hearty handshake with God to loving and abiding embrace. The difference, however slight, between the Scribe and Jesus was not about the importance or interpretation of the *Shema,* but about the estate of the heart that put it into practice. After all, Jesus' teachings where about opening hearts, and opening them up in such a way that God would recreate them. Christ's Kingdom would be full of hearts that would be formed to radiate truth, hope, and charity; formed to radiate God's goodness and mercy even as His people are even able to enjoy his presence among them.

For those that follow Jesus, then, our obedience and love of God in Christ with heart, mind, soul, and strength create in us new hearts, better able to reach out with His love to our neighbors. Each day brings us new opportunities to test and practice this. Tonight actually offers an array of possibilities for testing our affections. Will we be stingy with our candy? Will we get mad when someone wears the same costume as us? The mind swirls with possibilities. But even as All Hallows Eve fades into All Saints' Day, I pray that we would be inspired to love the Lord with all that we've got, loving whomever God puts in our midst as He loves us and them. Thus, we will follow in the steps of our saintly forebears in the faith and pray that we ourselves would enjoy the rich blessings of Christ's Kingdom.

To Him be all Glory; from age to age. Amen.