Imagination is powerful. Sometimes it is a new idea that had never occurred to us. Sometimes it is a reminder of what we once knew, or the rekindling of a passion we once felt. However it comes, imagination is powerful.

Seventeen years ago, the last time I lived in Kansas City, I was asked to be the guest preacher for the Kansas West Conference. In 1996, I couldn’t imagine moving to Dodge City for seven years and then Wichita for eight. Neither could my family. We thought we’d be in Kansas City for life.

Evidently, however, life elsewhere was not beyond the imagination of our Bishop, Fritz Mutti! He sent and I went. And the rest, as they say, is history.

And I am jazzed to be back in Kansas City and serving my second year as the Senior Pastor here at Old Mission Church. I hope that shows. And I also am excited about a little energy and forward vision bubbling up toward our future. I believe it will take imagination to move us forward!

But back in my childhood, when I was growing up in KC, I never imagined that I would spend my life being a pastor for more than thirty years and that I would end up loving my work. But I do. And I hope that also shows!

I was not the only one who could not imagine that future. Certainly my High School classmates did not imagine it. There are several reasons, most of which I won’t discuss in this message. But trust me, they had reasons!

They also thought, like I did, that I would end up an engineer. And likewise, though my family went to church every Sunday, I am reasonably sure that my Sunday School teachers and youth leaders were surprised. Trust me.

So was my family. Unlike some colleagues I know, no one in my family was ever a minister, or at least none who admitted it. But here I am. The truth is - I am here because I caught a vision of who I could become.
Our imagination is often limited by our small expectations and our partial vision. But God’s imagination knows no limits! And if we let him, God will surprise us with unanticipated adventures that are part of letting him lead.

I love that about God. Most of all, I love the power of God’s imagination and vision when it percolates up in us, and we catch a sense of what is possible. So today, and in this series of messages, I want to ask you to lean into your imagination for your life and into God’s imagination for Old Mission!

Last Thursday night, our Church Council adopted a new purpose statement for Old Mission: “Making a difference by loving God and loving people.”

It is different than our previous purpose statement in three important ways.

First, and most important, it comes right out of the Bible. Jesus said it in Mark 12:30-31, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Second, also important, it is consistent with who we are as a Church. It comes from the inputs of literally hundreds of people. From my first Sunday here, more than a year ago, I have been asking “What is it that brought you to and keeps you at Old Mission?” Over and over again, I heard that this is a Church that loves God deeply, where people really matter, and that tries to make a real difference for others, wherever we can. This is who we are.

Third, it is simple and memorable. There are only three key phrases, six words. Making a difference. Loving God. Loving people. You probably know them by now, don’t you? We hope everyone will know them soon. You are going to see them a lot - on everything we do - starting this week. And we are hard at work developing a forward vision, based on that purpose.

Would you join me in thanking the members of our Leadership Team and the seventy members of our Church Council who developed this?

I believe that when Jesus taught the three truths that we find in Mark 12, Matthew 22 and Luke 10, he was defining the essential characteristics of following him. Without any one of them we miss God’s design for Christian living. With all of them, we grow and flourish and the world is blessed.

And Jesus’ message is in our Scripture text from Mark 12:28-34.
One 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?”

He asked Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment?” This sounds harmless, innocuous, innocent. But it wasn’t. Really, it was a doctrinal test for Jesus.

There still are a lot of religious people like that. There are long statements of faith to see if you belong in their group or not. Are you in, or are you out?

That was the case here. The Rabbis found some 618 commandments in the first five books of the Bible, which they called The Law. They even broke them down into positive and negative commandments. Honor your parents was a positive command. Do not commit murder was a negative command. Like that.

And even they knew 618 rules were a lot to keep! So, in good rabbinic tradition, they were in an extended debate about which were the most important. So they are testing Jesus to see where he falls in this argument. But Jesus does something interesting. He answers the question, but not in the way that they asked it.

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.’”

They asked for the greatest commandment - the most important thing to do. And Jesus answers, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.” That comes from Deuteronomy 6:5. And they couldn’t disagree. If you were Jewish, you knew this verse and you knew how important it was.

It still is. If you try to live your life without learning to love God first, learning to worship God first, learning to pray for his love to teach you how to love, you are setting yourself up to always fail and feel rotten when you do. Loving God back because God loves us first is where we draw the energy to serve him. That’s what worship is, at its essence. It is loving God. It is the first rule of a Godly life.

But Jesus messes with their head here. He goes on to say that there is in fact not just one greatest commandment. He says that there are two.

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1 Mark 12:28, New Revised Standard Version. Copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Look at verse thirty-one and consider the power of Jesus’ teaching:

31*The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.*”

The verse Jesus quoted also comes from The Law. But it was not on the “top ten” list they were discussing. It was buried in the 618 other commandments in Leviticus 19:18. And Jesus’ genius was putting those two commands together.

Loving God is primary, Jesus says, but it is equally important to love people. In fact, **what he says is even more revolutionary.** He says these commands are not just equally important. They are equal. To love your neighbor is to love God. In fact, it is how we love God.

Father Ian Morgan Cron spoke at a recent event here in Kansas City and said something I found powerful. **“If we love God, then we should love the things that God loves. And there’s nothing that God loves more than people.”**

Some 2000 years later, not much has changed. People still have tests to see who is in and who is out. But Jesus says that if his followers believe that this person or that person is not worthy of our love – we are in fact not loving God. And for the times when we may have done that, may God have mercy on us all.

But something else happens too. Most of us want to do the right thing. We want to serve others, love others, and make a difference in this world. The problem is, unless we are doing the things that lead to spiritual growth in loving God, like worshipping regularly rather than occasionally, and spending time with other Christians, we run out of gas, and inspiration, and imagination. We need both!

Bart Campolo, founder of Mission Year, a Christian immersion experience for college graduates in inner city Philadelphia, sums up this passage this way: **“Love God. Love people. Nothing else matters.”**

I think he’s right. I believe nothing matters more. So did Jesus.

There's a long, proud strain of teaching in the Church that says economic success is an indicator of a successful life. It also is known as **“the protestant work ethic”** or **“The American Dream.”** And there is nothing wrong with wanting success.

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But it’s not everything. In fact without “something more” we end up unsatisfied and incomplete. That something more is “significance” - knowing that our lives matter, that we have made a difference.

I once imagined that a nice house, a healthy marriage, a fulfilling career, a great family, a good car – well actually I always wanted a great car – was enough.

Now I know better. I love all those things. But at the end of my life - whenever that comes many years from now - I want the inscription on my final resting place to say none of those things. Because of following Jesus, I am bold to imagine an inscription that might say this: “He made a difference.” What do you imagine?

Where did I learn to imagine more for my life? From loving God and loving people. From Jesus. From Mark 12, and his words in our text today.

When I was in Wichita, our Senior High Youth claimed this passage as their design for ministry, and had T-shirts printed that said, “Rule 1. Rule 2. (Mark 12).”

One of my favorite stories of how they lived that out was the day they met for worship at the Church and then issued rolls of quarters to the students and spent the next hour feeding every parking meter that need it around the Century II Convention Center, which was packed with people for a major event.

One of the students was “caught in the act,” and was asked why he would do that for a total stranger. He said, “Rule 2 - love people.” The person asked, “What is Rule 1?” He answered, “Love God.” They got it. My guess is that you do too.

Imagine what your life and your family might be like if you lived that way. Imagine what our Church might be like if we lived that way. Imagine what a difference it might make if we lived that way.

Why? Because imagination is a powerful thing.