

NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, May 17, 2015

Seventh Sunday of Easter – 10:00 a.m.

First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Mark 12:28-34 (adapted)

One of the scribes came near and heard the Pharisees and the Herodians and the Sadducees disputing with Jesus and one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, “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.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘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.” When 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.



Astronomers and astrophysicists and cosmologists have some fascinating and mind-boggling things to teach us about the universe in which we live. In our home galaxy alone, there may be millions of solar systems, each with its own habitable planet or two. Fermi's paradox: Earth may be the only planet in the Milky Way galaxy, or even in the observable universe, where there are living things.¹

There's a lot that we don't know about the universe. But whether or not we are alone in the universe, one thing we do know for certain is that we human beings on this earth are “mixtures strange of good and ill,” in the words of Curtis Beach. Capable of amazing athletic and technological achievements. Capable of abiding love and generous altruism. Capable of doing terrible things as well—to one another, to entire nations or ethnic groups, to our home planet. We need to be commanded by a power, a reality, greater than ourselves, a power that can deliver us from the evil of which we are so tragically capable.

In today's reading from Mark's Gospel, a scribe, who understands the role of commandments, wants to know “which commandment is the first of all.” In asking this question, the scribe addresses Jesus as “Teacher.” (“The words 'teacher,' 'teach' or 'teaching,' and 'Rabbi' are applied to Jesus in Mark's Gospel 39 times.”²)

Much of Jesus' teaching in this Gospel takes place when he answers questions or responds to challenges. Some of the questions that people ask him are intended to trap him, as in the question about paying taxes. It is often Jesus' opponents, the “scribes and Pharisees,” who ask questions that do not arise out of a sincere wish to know the answer, but rather are intended to put Jesus on the spot.

The particular scribe in today's story, however, doesn't act like an opponent of Jesus. He seems to be asking his question “in a spirit of respect and receptivity.”³ As one commentator has noted, the scribe may be asking which commandment helps us to understand and interpret all the other commandments (of which there were, in Jesus' time, 613). Or he may be asking which commandment it is most important to fulfill before all the other commandments. But regardless of which way the scribe is asking, his question “goes to the very heart of religious faith.”⁴

Jesus' answer is clear and succinct. He replies by quoting two biblical passages, one having to do with love of God, the other having to do with love of neighbor. Taken together, these two commandments “comprise the heart of faithfulness, so that religion is a matter of [both] divine and human relationships, of personal devotion and [social] consequence.”⁵ The scribe recognizes the

¹ <http://abyss.uoregon.edu/~js/cosmo/lectures/lec28.html>.

² <http://www.biblestudytools.com/mark/>. Accessed online on 11-01-2012.

³ Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, *Preaching the Gospel of Mark – Proclaiming the Power of God* (Louisville: WJK, 2008), 213.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

wisdom of Jesus' answer, and he expands on Jesus' interpretation by exclaiming that love of God and love of neighbor are “much more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Another commentator on this text notes that “the depth of the scribe’s confession is perhaps lost to many of us. It is as if [we] were willing to set aside our most important expressions of faith for the sake of our God and our neighbor. As important as the offerings and sacrifices were, they paled in comparison to this first principle. Or, speaking in today’s terms, as important as our church traditions and even our political commitments are, they pale in comparison to Jesus’ unswerving call to love God and neighbor.”

Remember that this conversation took place in Jerusalem, at a time when worship in the Jerusalem temple often required “burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Remember also that most of the earliest readers and hearers of Mark’s Gospel lived in the years after the Jerusalem temple had been destroyed by the Roman military. These Jewish Christians lived in a time when it was no longer possible to show one’s devotion to God through burnt offerings and sacrifices.

What Mark wants the hearers and readers of his gospel to understand is that if they follow Jesus’ teaching, they will embody their devotion to God through love of neighbor. This story is a reminder that it was Jesus who first brought together the commandments about love of God and love of neighbor and really made them into one commandment, or at least into two equal commandments. In bringing these two commandments together, Jesus demonstrated that “there is no love of God except in love of neighbor.”⁶

This teaching is certainly not unique to the gospel of Mark. The letter of James, for instance, which stresses the importance of people in the beloved community caring for one another, refers to “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” as “the royal law” (James 2:8). In the letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul writes: For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Galatians 5:14). The first letter of John makes a similar point: “those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (I John 4:20b). And of course Jesus himself, in the parable of the sheep and goats, makes it crystal clear that in loving the neediest among us, we are at the same time loving Jesus.

There can be no doubt among us that these two commandments “comprise the heart of faithfulness, so that religion is a matter of [both] divine and human relationships, of personal devotion and [social] consequence.”⁷ Moreover, these two love commandments aren’t just suggestions or recommendations. They’re commandments: they identify obligations, not options. I would also like to say that they identify opportunities as well.

Here is the opportunity: as we immerse ourselves in the story of Jesus, we encounter a person who in fact loved God with all his being, and his neighbor as himself. As we immerse ourselves in the story of Jesus, we discover that God

⁶ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 318.

⁷ Ibid.

loves us unconditionally. If we accept this unconditional love, this amazing grace, then we can be inspired and equipped to love God and one another and our neighbor and God's green earth.

When the scribe in today's story approached Jesus with his question about the law—which was really a question about what we human beings owe to God and to one another—his curiosity became an opportunity to get to the heart of his religion. So too when we approach the story of Jesus with our questions, we will discover opportunities to get to the heart of our religion.

The scribe seems to have been quite taken by Jesus' answer to his question. “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘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.”

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament share the conviction that we human beings are commanded by God to love God and neighbor. As I noted last week, love in this sense is not primarily an emotion: it is an attitude that leads to action. You in this congregation practice the action of love of neighbor in several ways, such as supporting the food pantry, and participating in the bread project, the proceeds of which you give to the emergency fuel fund in Haddam.

The narrator of today's story notes that Jesus saw that the scribe answered wisely, and said to the scribe, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” I hear these words of Jesus resonating in our time as well. I hear these words of Jesus speaking to us as well as to the scribe. When we understand our opportunity, and our obligation, to love God and neighbor, we are not far from the kingdom of God. Blessing and honor, glory and power, be unto God. Amen.