

TEXT: Mark 12:28-34  
THEME: You are not far from the Kingdom of God  
SUBJECT: Law of God  
TITLE: Near

24th Sunday after Pentecost  
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Messiah Moravian  
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Jesus is in a theological debate with Sadducees. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the body or in the persistence of the soul after death. They denied divine providence and maintained that humans have free choice - that God has nothing to do with human good and evil. They were a religious and social party who Josephus characterizes as rich and aristocratic.

A scribe is impressed by Jesus' performance with the Sadducees and joins the debate. Scribes were elite scholars who specialized in the teaching and interpretation of religious texts, particularly Torah. Mark portrays the scribe as sympathetic to Jesus and "not far from the kingdom of God."

Many have read this as "so near yet so far." It is possible, however, to read Jesus' response as a figure of speech in which an affirmative is expressed by the negation of its opposite. In effect Jesus says, "You are near the kingdom of God." The connotation is, "I have nothing more to say to you because you are well within the kingdom of God."

Matthew and Luke, writing ten to fifteen years after Mark, portray the scribe as "testing" Jesus in a hostile manner. They reflect the growing distance between Judaism and the emerging church, and attribute negative motives to the scribe.

Jesus and the scribe agree on what is essential to Judaism: God is one. To love God with one's whole being and to love one's neighbor as oneself matters more than anything else.

If we think of love as a feeling, as an emotion, we might wonder how love can be commanded, subject to the law. I don't know about you, but my feelings do not respond well to commands. If I am blue and someone tells me to buck up, I don't cheer up on command. In fact, I might become less than civil to the one telling me to get over myself.

The word "love" appears five times in Mark, four of those five occurrences are in the text for today where love is commanded. The fifth occurrence we heard a couple of weeks ago in the story of the exceedingly rich man who asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus responds, "You know the commandments. Keep them." The significance of Jesus' response is easily lost on contemporary Christians, especially Protestants, who believe eternal life comes through faith and the grace of God. (The word "grace" does not appear

in the synoptic Gospels, only three times in John, all in the prologue, and 101 times in the letters of Paul.)

The man tells Jesus he has kept all the commandments from his youth, from the age of accountability which today is apparently somewhere in middle age if ever. Jesus looks at this man and loves him, then tells him to sell everything he has and give it to the poor.

Love, for Mark, is not a feeling; it is doing what the law commands. It is the work of one's life, of the whole one's life. Deuteronomy 6 reads. "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength." Jesus quotes this and adds, "with all your mind." The scribe, being a scholar, readily agrees.

If your questions about faith are not taken seriously, the command to love God with all you mind is not being honored. Just because some questions are beyond the reach of reason is no reason to dismiss the work of loving God with all your mind. In fact, the neglect of this work diminishes not only faith but your life as well.

To paraphrase the poet (Constantine Cavafy), As you set out toward the answer to your unanswerable question, hope the way is long, full of reversals, full of knowing. Do not hurry the journey at all. Better it lasts many years; and you end an old man/woman, rich with all that you've gained on the way.

For your questions gave you a beautiful journey. Without them you would not have set out. They have nothing more to give you. They have not fooled you. Having become so wise, with so much experience, you will have understood, by then, what these questions mean.

In addition to quoting Deuteronomy 6, Jesus also quotes Leviticus 19:18 which reads in full, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." Love of God and neighbor, Jesus and the scribe agree, stand at the heart of Judaism. To denigrate Judaism as legalism and characterize Christianity as the religion of love is not only misinformed, it is anti-semitic.

The law of reciprocity, of vengeance, (an eye for an eye) is rejected. Resisting the urge to retaliate may be the hardest work we every do. As hard as it is, the law demands more. It demands we love our enemies.

Love is very hard work. It is the work of creatively and constructively building up what vengeance desires to tear down. The more we do love's work, the closer we are to the kingdom of God. We cannot be near God without being near our neighbor.