

Not Far from the Kingdom

Mark 12:28-34 ...[Jesus] said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom."

Jesus has been involved in a theological debate about whether there is really a resurrection of the dead.(12:18-27) The Sadducees argue against it. Jesus reprimands them: "You know neither the scriptures nor the power of God." In other words, you claim to know the scriptures back to front. You debate this or that passage. You talk a lot about God. But if you were to see deeply into scripture, you would know God's power to bring new life. If you were reading scripture with an open heart, not trying to prove something but to see something, to become aware, you would know that "God is the God of the living, not the dead." God is the God of life, not death.

A scribe has been observing all of this. He sees in Jesus no ordinary teacher, but one who comes at things differently, in a deeper way. He now brings his question. "Which commandment is the first of all?" He wants to know not about life-after-death but life-before-death. What is the best way to live these precious lives God has given us? What is the most important focus for our lives? Christianity, like the other major world religions, is ultimately concerned with what it means to live as a true human being. Jesus was not interested in our being religious, but truly human. It is not about how to get out of this world, but how to live fully in it as God's good but troubled creation.

Jesus likes this guy! He is not looking for a debate, picking a fight, or showing off how much he knows. He is seeking meaning and purpose for his life. He is after something real. I think Jesus was probably weary of debates with religious leaders who were only interested in scoring points. With this man, however, Jesus seems fully engaged. He really wants to learn something that will affect his life.

"Which commandment is the first of all?" Which is most important? I know all the commandments are important, but if you had to condense everything into one all-important way to live, what would it be? It is interesting that Jesus does not mention any of the Ten Commandments, as we might expect. In fact, you can't find anything in Jesus' teachings to support the fervent efforts by some to display the Ten Commandments in public places. Jesus begins with the core confession of Israel: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one. And you shall love God with your whole being--body, mind, spirit, strength of effort."(Deuteronomy 6:4-5) Then Jesus adds another one. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."(Leviticus 19:18) This is the essence of what it means to live as a human being as God made us to live. If we are devoting ourselves to loving God and loving others as ourselves, growing in our understanding of what that means and putting it into practice, we will fulfill our truest identity and vocation as human beings. The whole meaning of our lives is to love.

Yes, Jesus, you are so right, says the scribe. If we are striving with all our being to love God and neighbor, then that is more important than all the religious observances we can make. It is the offering of our very lives in love. Jesus affirms the man's sincerity: "You are not far from God's kingdom." You are on the right track. Your life is on firm footing. If we are making our lives a vocation of loving God with our whole being and loving others as we love ourselves, then we are living life as we were made to live it. This is the kind of life that truly contributes to the world's well being. It is "eternal life" as Jesus understood it, a life of lasting meaning and quality.

You are not far from the kingdom! In the Gospel of Luke, some Pharisees ask Jesus when the kingdom of God will come and how they can see signs of it (Luke 17:20-21). Jesus tells them, Don't look for signs. Don't get distracted looking here and there and everywhere. Quit speculating about the "end of the world" or any of that stuff. The kingdom of God is right in your midst. It is even WITHIN you! It is clear from Jesus' teachings and life that he fully believed we are able to live the life God created us to live, if we will only do it. The kingdom of God is not some other-worldly dimension; it is

life as it is meant to be lived here and now, life as God intends it. Jesus does not see us as powerless and wretched sinners, incapable of living the way God calls us to live. The real scandal or challenge of Jesus' teachings is that he fully believed we ARE capable of living as God made us to live. It is the life to which he calls us and in which he gives us his power, wisdom, light, and spirit. You are not far from the kingdom. You not only know what is most important about life but also are capable of living your life that way. The kingdom is not some far-off ideal place in the heavens. It is right in your midst, right next to you. It is even within your own heart.

Christian spiritual life is not about extraordinary or esoteric spiritual experience. It is about the way of loving God with our whole being and loving others as we love ourselves. The Church of the Covenant has framed this in terms of what we call the inward journey and the outward journey. In fact, we could call it the inward journey and the outward journey of loving God and our neighbor as ourselves. Loving God and others, and ourselves, involves an inward dimension and an outward one. Prayer, reflection, deeper understanding, and cultivating in inner listening silence are as important to our relationship with other people as to our relationship with God. Using our gifts, energies, decisions, time, and resources are as important an expression of our love of God as our love of others. By others, we need to include the creation itself and how our living affects and appreciates our life as part of the fabric of the world God created. And in all of this, we need to pay attention to ourselves, as well. Loving others as we love ourselves means that we treat ourselves with the same compassion, understanding, forgiveness, and care as we offer others.

The kingdom of God, life as God created it to be lived, is right here, around us and within us. It is found as we give attention to our living as a vocation of loving God with our whole being and loving others as ourselves. The way of the inward and outward journeys gives us a framework for keeping our lives rooted in the life of God's kingdom.

The story ends: "After that no one dared ask him any question." How could they? Jesus has left it where he always leaves it. We know what is most important. We are not far from the kingdom of God. Now it is a matter of doing it, of living the life Jesus embodied and taught, and to which he calls us.