

November 4, 2012 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

Not Far from the Kingdom

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

Psalm 119:1-8 *Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord.*

Mark 12:28-34

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.

The readings for today are the heart of life and faith, not only of our own but of every major spiritual tradition. They speak of our relationship with the Reality that is at the heart of the universe, that we experience as both utter mystery and near, life-giving Presence. To love God with our whole being is the first and foremost “work” of our lives. It means to awaken to, nourish and nurture our connection with the Source of our lives and the life of the world. It means, then, to harmonize our lives with God's loving purposes—to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. This embraces all our relationships, with people, with the neighborhood that is the creation, and with ourselves. In our community this is expressed in the discipline of “endeavoring to be a channel of God's love and forgiveness in every relationship.” Here is the goal, the sum, the fulfillment of the truly human life. It is not about doctrines. It is not about creeds. It is not about “sacrifices and offerings”, as the psalmist puts it. It is about the offering of our whole being to God and to life, and we call this love.

Moses is giving the people of Israel last instructions before they cross into the Land of the Promise. He cannot go with them, so his last words have a particular urgency and weight. What is most crucial for them to remember so that their life in the new land will be happy and fruitful? *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.* This is also translated: *The Lord our God is one Lord, or one God.* In Judaism this is called the *shema* (“hear”), and is the central confession or faith expression of the people. There is one God who is the source of all life and is to be loved with our whole being—body, mind, spirit, strength. That is the path of life that is true life for us as human beings.

We must hear this in a new and fresh way today. It is not about loving our God, the God of one's own religious tradition. It is about loving the mysterious Power and Life that is at the heart of all life, including our own, the Reality to which the words we use only point us. There is not a

Jewish God, or Christian God, or Hindu God, or Muslim God. There is the one “God” to whom all these traditions point in their own rich ways. Today we must hear this foremost call to love God with the whole of our lives as opening more and more to the near and intimate, yet mysterious Source and Power of all life. This does not mean we give up our own practice and tradition. Not at all. It means that we go deeper—beyond ideas, beyond doctrines and creeds, beyond any notion that what we call God is contained in any one tradition. It is discerning and awakening to the loving of God that brings fullness of life.

A scribe is listening in on a dispute between some Sadducees and Jesus. The Sadducees had picked a fight with Jesus over the resurrection. Arguing about stuff, especially religion, is pretty safe. You can focus on being right, winning intellectual points, instead of actually living right. You can keep everything in the head and avoid the hard work of living it out in your life. Arguing about religion is about as pointless an exercise as we can engage in. It is a head trip. Jesus calls us to “life trip”, a journey of faith lived out day by day.

This scribe seems serious-minded, interested in reality and truth, not religious disputes. He sees Jesus as someone who could give a serious and straight answer. So he asks: *Which commandment is the first of all? Of all the hundreds of laws that had become part of Israel's life, what is most important of all? It is hard to keep track of so many! Is there one that, if we gave our full attention to it, would fulfill all the rest?*

Jesus' answer is unhesitating. *The first of all is the 'Hear, O Israel', the Shema. God is one God, and you shall love God with heart, soul, mind, and strength—with your whole life. There is a second most important one: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Leviticus 19:18) Nothing is more important than these.* The scribe is pleased with this, knows truth when he hears it. *You are right, Teacher. Loving God with our whole being, our whole lives, and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, this is so much more important than all our offerings and sacrifices, all our religious rituals and practices.*

Love of God and love of neighbor as self. That's it. That's the whole of it. That's the aim, the goal, the fulfillment of religion and spiritual practice. It is not about another world beyond this. It is about this world and how we live in it with awareness and love of God, and love of others as we love our own lives. This means certainly that we love ourselves, value and care for our own lives, a matter that we often neglect. It may also mean that we love others as though they WERE ourselves, honoring their lives as we do our own. Today neighbor must include the neighborhood of the earth and all its creatures and resources. Loving God and loving all that is part of our lives as human beings. That is the way of true human life.

Last weekend, Michael Morwood shared a marvelous presentation with us at the retreat. It was about what we have been learning from science about the nature of the universe. The

astounding process of evolution, which is NOT a survival of the fittest thing—that is a misinterpretation and misuse of Charles Darwin's ORIGIN OF THE SPECIES. The nature of the working of the universe is cooperation and communication. It is dying giving birth to new life. It is the story of a process, a mysterious yet near Power and Energy that motivates, connects, and charges everything with life. After Michael took us through all of this, he said that the way that this Power and Source of life expresses itself in the human being is LOVE. And love expresses itself in compassion, justice, wonder, delight, and other ways we as human beings are made to live harmoniously with the rest of the creation, the universe. We as humans also have the freedom to say no to all of this, and we are very aware these days of the many destructive ways in which we as a human family say NO to the life of love. Yet when we say YES, as Moses told the Israelites, we can dwell together in this land flowing with milk and honey, this beautiful, bountiful earth with fruitfulness and health, and as the psalmist says, with happiness, happiness in the deepest and most profound sense.

All of this leads us right back to the spiritual life as we understand and work with it here in our community. The inward and outward journeys are the way we frame the life of loving God with our whole being and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Sometimes we make it more complicated than that. But our texts today help us to get back to the heart of it. The life of faith as we understand it is not complicated. It can be put so succinctly and completely—love God with our whole being; love our neighbor as we love ourselves. It is living this out that is for us challenging and why we need to commit ourselves to disciplines or practices that keep us on the journey inward and outward, and to do so in community.

Moses tells the people how important it is to talk about loving God with our whole being, talking about it all the time, day and night, walking and sitting, working and resting, and binding it on our hands and putting it on our doorposts and gates. This is not talking for the sake of talking. It is talking for the sake of deeper, wiser understanding, and more faithful living. As I read these words, I thought about how important it is that we do the same today. Growing in our understanding and practice of loving God and others, as well as ourselves, is something we need to always be talking about together. What it means today. What it means with this particular person or in this particular situation. Specific ways we can harmonize our living with God's presence and workings in the world, the universe. Seeing our gifts and callings in this light, how they have been given us to express love in the world. That is why we must have in our mission groups a time for each member to share, on a regular basis, a full report on how he or she is doing with these things. Where I am feeling stuck. Where I am experiencing some growth in understanding or living. Where I need insight and wisdom. What I need to let go of and what I need to focus on. These are sacred conversations we have with one another, for we, each and

together, know that fullness of life is found as we live in this direction.

I find the story of Jesus and the scribe quite moving. The two have a shared heart and mind. They see the same thing, the same truth. Jesus says to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." I imagine Jesus giving him a slight wink and a knowing and warm smile as he said it. Not far from the kingdom? The scribe was wise enough to know where true life is found. He is not far from...but what would it mean to be IN the kingdom of God? Knowing what is true and right is one thing. Living it out is another, and that's where we find ourselves in the kingdom, the realm of God's love. And that's what we are about. After this profound agreement between Jesus and the scribe, no one dared ask Jesus anything further. How could they? There is nothing more to ask, to discuss. Now it is about living.