

Sunday November 4th, 2018
Pentecost 24

PRAYER: Your ways are just and true, O God, and your commandments trustworthy. Your steadfast love is never far from us in the person of Jesus Christ, our Saviour. In him we know your righteous judgment, your reconciling redemption, and your encompassing care for the whole of creation. Through him we shall walk humbly, live justly, and worship you joyously, God of our lives!

WORDS OF ASSURANCE: The testimony of Scripture affirms our pardon when we hear the words “How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God.” (Hebrews 9:14) In Jesus Christ our sins are forgiven.

STEWARDSHIP: We come now bearing our gifts to our Redeeming God, having been cleansed by His mercy, sustained by his grace and led by his righteousness. May God purify what we bring to serve his purpose, and nurture us to act according to his will, so that all we have and all we do may bring justice on earth.

PASTORAL PRAYER:

Great are your words, O God; you make our hearts glad. Wherever we look we see your goodness. Throughout history you have restored the fortunes of your chosen people. In barren lands you led them to living waters. When they were hungry, you sent manna to sustain them. Those who went forth weeping returned home with shouts of joy, recounting the benefits of your wondrous love.

We give thanks for Christ, in whose name we inherit your mercy, and confess anew our faith in him as our high priest. He bore our weaknesses in his body, and thereby made us strong. We give thanks that he lives among us today to encourage the fainthearted, empower the weak, comfort the lonely, and bring release to the captives. Through him we are able to serve above and beyond our collective abilities, and for that legacy we give you thanks.

We give thanks for your Holy Spirit, who renews our flagging spirits and sends us forth with praise on our lips. In the midst of doubt, your Spirit brings clarity; when we are weary, your Spirit revives us. We can rely on your Spirit during lonely adventures; throughout our wanderings, we are never without your presence.

Our hearts bet with joy, thanks to your graciousness. Our eyes see more clearly, thanks to the vision of Christ our Savior. Our whole selves move freely, thanks to your indwelling Spirit. We shout glad alleluias, so great are your works.

BENEDICTION: The Word of God is at work among you. Let it also work through you, to the glory of God and the joy of creation.

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Mark 12:28-34
“Close to the Kingdom”

Perhaps you have heard this chestnut before but the story goes that a mother tried to wake her son. “Get up son. It’s time to go to school.” “But why, mom? I don’t want to go.” “Give me two reasons why you shouldn’t go to school,” his mother said. “Well, for one, the kids hate me, and second, the teachers hate me too!” “Oh, those aren’t reasons to stay home. Come on now and get ready,” his mother coaxed.

“Give me two reasons why I should go to school,” he demanded. “Well, for one you’re 47 years old. And for another, you’re the principal!” I think we can all appreciate this principal’s attitude. It must be very difficult to spend all your time trying to teach people, only to have your efforts frustrated at every turn. So, it is with this in mind that I think we can appreciate also how Jesus must have felt.

Day in, and day out, trying to communicate truth to people, only to have some of his listeners take his words, and try to use them to discredit him. It is just one more reason we should honour our Saviour’s commitment to reach us; because I am sure there were days when he probably would have preferred to stay in bed. But in today’s gospel lesson things were different and we need to explore why.

To begin with, I have a question this morning for us to ponder. What do you think is more frustrating; fishing all day and catching nothing, or catching the big fish only to have it slip off the hook just before you can net it? What’s worse, striking out at the plate, or hitting a ball all the way to the fence only to have it be caught at the wall by the outfielder? What is more upsetting, arriving at a store one hour after it closes, or one minute?

Wouldn’t you agree with me that sometimes, it is preferable to miss by a country mile, rather than mere inches? We have expressions that capture the reality of a close call. We say, “Close but no cigar” harping back to old carnival days when people would try their luck at a carnival game (probably rigged) only to just miss winning the cigar. When I was a boy growing up we used to say in my neighbourhood when you missed a shot in hockey, or a goal in some other sport, “Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades”.

Personally, close just doesn’t make me feel better. Missing the gold medal by hundredths of a second is a bitter pill to swallow. Missing your bus by 10 seconds, the start of a movie by five minutes, or dare I say it, the lottery by one number, hardly seems fair. I really don’t like things “close”, but not quite there. With the exception maybe being a close call with an auto accident, or a piano dropping from the third floor.

How often do we have to endure almost succeeding, only to fall short? Why are our goals to get the promotion, get that “A” on a test, and pick the right stock investment, or buying the right property at the right time, so elusive? Always coming second, or falling short, or arriving late; is enough to drive us to despair. So, I wonder how I would have felt if I was the religious teacher Jesus tells, “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.”

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Not far! How far? Where is it? What more must I do to reach it? It is a surprising moment, to say the least, in the midst of a very hostile passage. This twelfth chapter of Mark reveals not just teaching to us, but as I mentioned, it shows us just how much hostility Jesus faced. Jesus has already cleared the temple, and irritated the religious leaders to the point they sought to arrest him. Their strategy was actually quite simple. Do what we can to undermine Jesus' credibility.

Bombard Jesus with questions about the Law of Moses, or the law of Rome, and get him to say something blasphemous, or something that would alarm the Romans, who feared sedition or revolts. So, they asked him about paying taxes, they asked him a ridiculous question about the resurrection and they bristled over a parable about evil farmers. The religious leaders: Pharisees, Scribes, Herodians, Sadducees, and others, all surrounded him and peppered him with questions.

On the day in question, there was one teacher of the law, a scribe, who listened intently to Jesus' responses. The passage indicates that this scholarly man was impressed by Jesus' answers. I think it is safe to say, that this unnamed teacher, had some realization that Jesus had something important to say and to offer. Maybe he felt his colleagues dismissed Jesus too quickly. In Luke 10, a similar encounter occurs, and Luke states that the teacher wanted to test Jesus, but Mark doesn't indicate the teacher was motivated to test Jesus.

It is also very probable that these are two separate events, as Mark places it in Jerusalem, and in Luke it is on the way to Jerusalem. Anyway, the teacher in Mark 12 asks, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" In other words, what is God's number one rule? Not an idle question, considering how many rules there were in Judaism, both scriptural and rabbinical.

The work of religious teachers, such as our friend in Mark 12, was to teach the hundreds of rules, and if necessary to enforce them. It was a lot to remember, and perhaps this teacher was seeking a legitimate way boil it all down. In other words, if we could remember this commandment and live by it, we cannot fail. In the Luke event, the teacher gives the answer, but here in Mark, Jesus does the honour.

"Here, O Israel! The Lord your God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength. The second is equally important: Love your neighbour as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these."

These two commandments are at the very heart of God's law, and God's will for his people. The rest of the law is mere commentary on these two commandments. When the teacher heard Jesus, he was pleased, because it confirmed what he himself had deduced from his study of the scriptures. "I know" he states. He acknowledges the importance of these two commandments.

I cannot help but have a scene triggered in my head from television. It is almost as if the teacher was on "Family Feud" clapping and shouting, "Good answer". This whole scene could have ended right here, with a simple exchange of thinking and an agreement on the truth of the inquiry, however the teacher changes everything, and immortalizes the encounter with his final words to Jesus. "This is more important than to offer all the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law." This is a powerful moment, please don't miss it.

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Jesus has been peppered constantly by those seeking to discredit him and here in the midst of this hostility emerges a real spiritual insight. The teacher got it. The Spirit of God had worked in his heart enough that he saw the heart of God's call to Israel. If you don't love God with your whole being, and love your neighbour as yourself, all the sacrifices in the world won't impress God.

To place this in another context from the Apostle Paul, "If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would be of no value whatsoever." (1 Corinthians 13:3) A sacrifice without love for God, and neighbour, is empty of all meaning. The teacher looked beneath the rules, and saw that merely following rules was not as important as having your heart changed.

Out of this sea of angry, petty, and hostile darkness in which Jesus walks, shines this bright light of insight, and Jesus is clearly taken with the man's understanding. "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." Pardon me? Not far? Close, but not yet there? The teacher clearly understands, but still Jesus says he falls short.

He's got the big fish to the boat, but he can't reel it in. He can hit the ball, but he can't get it over the fence. This teacher's experience with Jesus should unsettle all of us. Christians have for centuries placed a very high value on understanding the intricacies of the faith. From an early age we emphasis learning the bible. It begins in Sunday school, and continues throughout our years in bible studies, and from pulpits.

Besides the bible, we also encourage the reading of other books, and materials, that give us insight into the workings of our faith. We even pray, quite often actually, that God would grant us understanding of his word. Knowledge is invaluable we conclude. To be the best Christian we can possibly be, we have to know stuff. Perhaps this emphasis on learning and knowledge and insight, is why some people feel intimidated whenever a religious discussion erupts.

They are afraid they don't understand enough, and might say something foolish or out of ignorance. Perhaps we have even believed that to get into, or at least close to the Kingdom of God, we have to know more. But Jesus seems to be indicating, at least to this well-schooled teacher of the law, that even though he has great insight, he is still just short of getting into God's Kingdom.

Just to be clear about this passage; Jesus isn't belittling knowledge or education. All he is suggesting is that there is a little bit more than education that we need to get into the kingdom. What do you think that extra thing is? Although this passage does not indicate what that thing is, the scriptures as a whole are very clear. In Luke's version, the teacher was trying to justify himself, and he asked that now famous question in response to loving our neighbours as ourselves, "And who's my neighbour?"

This of course leads to the parable of the "Good Samaritan". The point in Luke is that the key step in our faithful journey into the Kingdom of God is not just knowing the truth, but more importantly, applying the truth to our lives. We can say that it is important to love God, and our neighbours, but if we do neither our knowledge is useless. This call to the application of truth to our lives is all over the bible.

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1 John 3:17 reads, “But if one of you has enough money to live well, and sees a brother or sister in need and refuses to help-how can God’s love be in that person?” Matthew 5:44 reads, “But I say to you, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!” And lest you think the Old Testament doesn’t join this call, read Isaiah chapter 1 which includes these powerful words.

“Why do you keep parading through my courts with your worthless sacrifices? The incense you bring me is a stench in my nostrils! I hate all your festivals and sacrifices. I can’t stand the sight of them! From now on, when you lift up your hands in prayer, I will refuse to look. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Help the oppressed. Defend the orphan. Fight for the rights of widows.” (Isaiah 1:12-15, 17)

When I was in university, occasionally I would meet someone, usually a senior citizen, but not always, who was attending the same course I was, but did not work on assignments. These curious people would attend lectures, and maybe tutorials, but as was explained to me, they were simply “auditing” the course. They paid a smaller fee, or in the case of seniors attended for free, but they had no desire to use their acquired knowledge.

Jesus doesn’t give us the option of auditing life. The truth we glean through scripture, prayer, sermons, and most importantly by the Holy Spirit, are not simply there for our edification or amusement. We are not to run our lives like the Prince of Grenada. Perhaps you have heard of the Prince of Grenada, who was an heir to the Spanish crown, but who was sentenced to solitary confinement in Madrid’s ancient prison called, “The Place of the Skull”.

The fearful, dirty, and dreary nature of the place earned that name. Everyone knew that once you were in, you would never come out alive. The prince was given one book to read the entire time-the bible. With only one book to read, he read it over hundreds and hundreds of times. The book was his constant companion. After thirty-three years of imprisonment, he finally died.

When they came to clean out his cell, they found some notes he had written using nails to mark the soft stone of the prison walls. The notations were of this sort: Psalm 118:8 is the middle verse of the bible, Ezra 7:21 contains all the letters of the alphabet except the letter “J”, the ninth verse of the eighth chapter of Esther is the longest verse in the Bible: and no word or name of more than six syllables can be found in the Bible.

When Scot Udell originally noted these facts in an article in *Psychology Today*, he noted the oddity of an individual who spent thirty-three years of his life studying what some have described as the greatest book of all time, yet could only glean trivia. From all we know, he never made any religious or spiritual commitment to Christ, but became an expert in Bible trivia.

This teacher of religious law in Mark’s gospel was an expert on all the trivia about the scriptures and law, but did it make any difference in how he loved God or his neighbour? Yes, we should regularly read and study the Bible, but only if we have open hearts to have the word change us. I don’t know about you, but I tremble at the thought of having Jesus say to me that I am close to the Kingdom of God.

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Close doesn't cut it for me. I want to be there, not simply in the neighbourhood. How about you? Are you content with simply being close to the Kingdom? If not, and your heart yearns to be in the Kingdom, then I suggest you apply the law of love to your life. Don't simply say you love God and your neighbour, but demonstrate your love, apply the love God gives you, and you will have closed the gap to God's Kingdom.