

A Question of Commitment
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
On November 4th, 2018

Mark 12:28-34

Today, we continue looking at questions the lectionary readings from the Gospel of Mark raise by focusing on an encounter Jesus has with a scribe who poses a question to him. In the lead-up to this passage, Jesus has just replied to a sophomoric hypothetical about life after death posed by the Sadducees, who didn't believe in resurrection in the first place. As if to say, "This is not a game," Jesus tells them, "You don't understand the scriptures or the power of God. God is a living God who brings life out of death and calls us to live fully here and now in response to this power." Hearing Jesus' response, the scribe draws near and queries him about which is the most important of the commandments. Listen now for how Jesus responds, especially the last thing he says to the scribe.

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he 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.

On Tuesday night, a good number of us from Immanuel were in attendance at the Service for Community Solidarity, Support and Comfort at Temple Rodef Shalom. Those of us who were there joined more than 2,000 of our neighbors from various religious traditions (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu and other Eastern Religions) and none—and people of various colors and ethnicities as well. Rabbi Amy Schwartzman started the service by telling us "In the Jewish tradition, we welcome one another *Broo-keem, Havayeem*, which means, "Blessed are those who come." She blessed us and thanked us for coming to show our support, and she called us to reach out to bless, to thank, and to say hello to a new friend sitting near us. Then the service continued with such breathtakingly beautiful songs and liturgy; remembrances of those who died at the hands of hate at the Tree of Life in Pittsburgh last Saturday and three days earlier at the Kroger in Kentucky; words of thanksgiving and encouragement for helpers and healers and protectors and prophets and community leaders; prayers of consolation and gratitude and celebrations of unity *and calls to do justice and give welcome*. Rabbi Amy, who became choked up more than once, said she was a crier, which made me feel a little better about my own propensity to shed a tear. If you were there and weren't moved to holy tears at the sheer beauty, hope, and holiness of that service, you may not be capable of crying at anything.

Over dinner after the service, my wife Judith, who, like me, was already thinking about preaching on this morning's text in her congregation, said to me "You know, we were not far from the kingdom of God tonight." I had to agree. We were oh, so close to God's beloved community, so near to the promise of peace.

It was right there. We could see it and hear it, taste it and touch it. And I want to tell you, it made us hungry and thirsty for more.

There's something about being challenged and inspired to live *up to* and *into* our higher selves that thrills us and makes us want to do *just that*. I think that was a big part of Jesus' appeal when he walked this earth. Oh, there was plenty of resistance to him, no question. But that came from people who were afraid of change, who didn't want to loosen their grip on power and privilege, and who saw his love for all, especially those on the margins, as a threat and not a sign of hope for a new and better future. But even some of those folks were secretly drawn to him, like flies to honey.

I believe that's what drew the scribe in today's passage to want to converse with Jesus. Sure, he might have been trying to *trip Jesus up* with his question about which was the most important commandment. But I prefer to think that the scribe really wanted to hear his response, especially after he saw how Jesus had answered others who were trying to trap him, with that way he had of always bringing it back to how we live and treat each other in the here and now. So when Jesus answered the scribe with the Hebrew *shema*, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one and you shall love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength" and then added, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," I think it *thrilled him*. It thrilled him in the same way hearing a truth that resonates deep within touches any of us.

So he tells Jesus, "You are right. You're right!" Then he repeats Jesus words back to him. "Love God heart, soul, mind, strength. Love neighbor as yourself." For good measure, he tacks on, "This is more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. Any ritual observance pales in comparison to living out love of God and neighbor in your life."

That is when Jesus, seeing that he answered him wisely, responded, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

He doesn't say, "You've got it. You're in." He says, "You are not far from it." I think that's Jesus way of telling the guy, *you're so close. All you have to do is to take one more step. All you have to do is move from knowing the right answer to acting on it. Move from **talking about** loving God and loving your neighbor as you love yourself into **actually doing it.***"

That's always the challenge, isn't it? That step from the thrill of hearing a deep truth spoken to doing something about it in our own lives. Putting God first really resonates with us, but we have busy and complicated lives and it can be hard to make the time for prayer or worship. Living our faith and giving in gratitude is a great slogan, and God knows we have a lot to be grateful for, not least of which includes what God is doing at Immanuel. But increasing our own commitment in thankful trust, well, maybe somebody else can do that. And loving our neighbor? Yeah, that's great and all. But what about when it is inconvenient? What about when our neighbor is hard to love for any one of a million reasons? What about when they lash out in pain? What about when they are fearful and angry? What about when they turn out to be broken and in need of mercy and we are tempted to forget our own brokenness and need of mercy?

I am so grateful that Bryan Stevenson is with us this morning. And Bryan, I am so looking forward to your time with us at 11:30 today. I was privileged to hear Bryan talk last night about the importance of showing up for those whom our society has marginalized—those who fail to receive equal justice because of the way our system is skewed, those who are mentally ill or disabled, those who sit on death row and have had very few people show up for them over the course of their lives, and so many others.

Bryan, one of the enduring themes of your work for me is the importance of proximity, of showing up, of getting close, or to put it in terms of today's text, of moving from being not far from the Kingdom to actually stepping into it and its work. I think of that scene where the 13 year old's grandma asked you to go in to see him in prison, and you tried every which way you could to get him to talk, but he wouldn't talk. And finally you moved over beside him and you sat there in silence. When you leaned in, he finally started to sob and shared stories of being terribly abused the two previous nights because he was sentenced as an adult and placed with adults. You have become proximate to pain and need, and learned deeply the truth of the lesson that you can't understand most of the important things from a distance, you have to get close. And if you'll allow me to quote from *Just Mercy*:

*"Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done. My work with the poor and the incarcerated has persuaded me that the opposite of poverty is not wealth; the opposite of poverty is justice. Finally, I've come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned."*¹

When we hear those words, and resonate with them, we are not far from the kingdom. But when they cause us to live and act in a different way—to be there for others, to stand up and let our voice be heard for justice, to treat the poor, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned with mercy and justice—well, when we do that, we've stepped into the kingdom.

It's the move from thinking somebody should do something to help the homeless, to signing up to volunteer at our hypothermia shelter and letting **that** proximity launch you into more opportunities to make a difference for the homeless. It's the move from reading Bryan's book to taking action on what you've read. It's the move from attending a wonderful service of unity and comfort to actively continuing the work of unity amidst diversity after the service is over.

One last thought. Today is our All Saints' Sunday observance. So after we share in communion together, we'll be hearing the names of our loved ones who died in the past year. There are quite a few of them, many of whom had quite an impact on Immanuel, directly or indirectly. As you hear those names read, and, if you'll carry the insert home with you, in the week to come, I want you to think about those saints we remember today who showed up for us in their lifetimes and called and continue to call us to show up for others. Then do one thing more, in their memory and in their honor. Show up for somebody else. Someone who really needs you to show up for them.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

¹ Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy* (New York, Spiegel and Grau, October, 2014) Pages 17 & 18.