

Date: November 1, 2009

Scripture: Mark 12:28-34

Title: "We Are Not Far"

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): A scribe is seeking the way to God. This is an example for all of us to follow.

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): We are not far from the kingdom of God. That is very good news.

(Remember, it's all about God!)

The Reverend Billy Graham tells a story of a time early in his ministry when he arrived in a small town to preach. Wanting to mail a letter, he asked a young boy where the post office was located. After the boy had told him, Rev. Graham thanked him and said, "If you'll come to the Church this evening, you can hear me telling everyone about God and how to get to Heaven." "I don't think I'll be there," the boy said. "Can you really get me to heaven, mister, if you don't even know your way to the post office" (Aha Jokes)?

I share that story today because our Gospel passage from Mark sounds like directions. "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34, NRSV). The next words could very well be, keep on going, you're on your way, you are not far, you are headed the right way. It's just a bit further. I have thought about those words this week. And the more I thought about them the more I wondered and marveled at them. What interesting words - when applied to a scribe - when applied to a member of a class of people that so often are portrayed negatively in the Gospels; That group of people so many of us have been taught were more concerned about the letter of the law than the spirit; more concerned with observance than with action. But regardless of what we have been taught and our own perception, this scribe was looking for a way to God.

It just goes to show that there is wisdom in the law of God and that those who study it can find the truth within it; the truth that love is more important than sacrifice and that mercy is more important than burnt offerings, and that these

things, love and mercy, are that from which all worthy laws flow. “You are not far from the Kingdom of God” (12:34). You who really try to do what is right. You who believe that God is the One and that God is Good and that to love God and your neighbor as yourself is what God’s will for us is all about. “You are not far from the Kingdom of God” (12:34). Those are good words to hear from the teacher. They are good words to hear from the one who bears the Kingdom within his very being and radiates the light of that kingdom for all to see.

Yet in the words “not far,” it is possible also to hear that “there is still some distance yet to go.” We are on the right track but we have not arrived. We are warm but not hot. Reverend Richard Fairchild writes about a park someplace in Europe where, he has been told, next to a beautiful flower bed, there is a sign, written in three languages:

In German the sign says: “Picking flowers is prohibited.”

In English: “Please do not pick the flowers.”

In French: Those who love flowers will not pick them (Fairchild).

It seems to me that in this sign lies part of the key as to what distinctions of distance we might read into Jesus’ statement: “You are not far from the kingdom of God”. We are close. That is good. But also, we are not there yet. We love flowers, good, please don’t pick the flowers, not so good.

What is our motivation for doing God’s will, obeying God’s commands? Is it fear of authority; desire for God’s approval; seeking the approval of others; or perhaps love? What in fact does it mean “to love God”? What does it mean “to love our neighbors as ourselves?” I have wondered this week as I thought about these words and in thinking about the scribe mentioned this week, I wondered if he lacked a little something in his passion and in his understanding of the law of God? Maybe there was a little bit too much duty and routine in his life of obedience and not quite enough eagerness and passion? I imagine the scribe being too much about holiness - of being apart from the world - and not quite enough about compassion and empathy? Again, it cannot be all bad being too holy, but some compassion and empathy are called for to go right along with that holiness.

But whatever it is, if anything, that causes a sense of distance between the scribe and the Kingdom of God, it ultimately does not matter; it is enough for him, and for us, to hear the words, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (12:34). The point is that we like the flowers. The point is that we are close to God. You of sincere heart and sincere purpose, you who believe and who try to do what is right, you who try to love as God wants you to love, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (12:34). Stay the course, keep doing what you are doing, it is within your

reach. I remember writing a paper early on in seminary where I stated that we cannot obtain the perfection of God. Then I added the words, as we try for that perfection we get closer.

Here's a story:

A thoughtful, curious young man went to the desert to visit an elderly man, a monk, who had lived in the desert for many years. Arriving at the holy man's cave, the young man encountered the monk, who was sitting out enjoying the sun, his dog lying lazily at his side. This spiritual seeker asked, "Why is it, teacher, that some who seek God come to the desert and are zealous in prayer, but leave after a year or so, while others, like you, remain faithful to the quest for a lifetime?" The old man smiled and replied, "Let me tell you a story. One day I was sitting here quietly in the sun with my dog. Suddenly a large, white rabbit ran across in front of us. Well, my dog jumped up, barking loudly, and took off after that big rabbit. He chased the rabbit over the hills with a passion. Soon other dogs ran barking across the creeks, up stony embankments, and through thickets and thorns! Gradually, however, one by one, the other dogs dropped out of the pursuit, discouraged by the course, and frustrated by the chase. Only my dog continued to hotly pursue the white rabbit. In that story, young man, is the answer to your question.

The young man sat in confused silence. Finally, he said, "Teacher, I don't understand. What is the connection between the rabbit chase and the quest for God?" "You fail to understand," answered the old hermit, "because you failed to ask the obvious question. The question is why didn't the other dogs continue the chase? And the answer to that question is that the other dogs had not seen the rabbit. They were attracted by the barking of my dog. But once you see the rabbit, you will never give up the chase. Seeing the rabbit, and not following the commotion, is what keeps me in the desert" (Fairchild).

"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. You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (12:29-31). You shall love. How can we not love? How can we who have seen the white rabbit do anything else but chase after it! And how can we who have only heard the commotion and smelled the scent not avoid the temptation of giving up the chase? The answer is a sincere and deep commitment to the commands of God, to the command to love.

When Jesus speaks to the scribe and affirms his wisdom and his insight, when Jesus tells him that he is very near to the kingdom of God, he is talking to all of us who strive to follow in the way of God, to all who seek to walk by God's light and

to do good rather than evil. He is telling us that folk draw close to the kingdom of God even when they do not use the name that we here in this church use - even when they do not name the name of Jesus - and even when they do not understand the fullness of God's mercy for them in Jesus. But how much better to have seen the rabbit; How much better it is to allow God's love for us in Christ to penetrate our hearts and to well up from inside us. As Garrison Keillor wrote, "To know and serve God, of course, is why we are here, a clear truth like that, like the nose on your face, is near at hand and easily discernible but can make you dizzy if you try to focus on I too hard. But a little faith will see [us] through" (Keillor).

I urge us today to consider the greatest of all the commandments and to think about the words of Jesus to the scribe, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (12:34). I urge us to not hear those commandments as if God's love for us depended on our fulfilling them but rather to hear what a wonderful place we have come to in our pursuit of righteousness and how much more wonderful it will be as our love grows ever more perfect through the Spirit that is alive in us. God loves us and God calls us to draw close to him so that we may know the fullness of his love. When we do that, when we know that love, we will have a sense of direction that means we will not fall away. We are not far from the kingdom of God. That's as clear as the nose on our face. We like the flowers. This is all very good news. Let us pray.

Lord, we sense your closeness. Help us, we ask, to move ever closer and not fall away. Point us continually toward you and keep us from being distracted by commotion so that we are always moving in your direction. All this we pray with love for you and our neighbor. Amen.

Offering: Our morning offering helps us to show our love for God and our neighbor. Let us give with that thought in mind. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: O God, Receive this day what we give. We acknowledge that all we have comes from you. We hope that our whole lives are seen as offerings to you. This we pray. Amen.

Benediction: Go forth with Christ's directions for life, knowing that God blesses our journey and that we travel with the power of the Holy Spirit. Go forth. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

Aha Jokes; Website; www.ahajokes.com ; 2009.

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Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Leshner, Jean A.; "The Common Book of Prayer"; Selection by Garrison Keillor; Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, OH; 1998.