

Not Far from the Kingdom of God

A Sermon by *the Rev. Dr. Joseph David Stinson*,
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Text: Mark 12:28b One of the scribes...asked [Jesus], "Which commandment is first of all?"

I heard a story this week about a morning radio show. You know the type: all chat and laughter. One of the hosts asked the other what were her first words that morning. And then the two asked listeners to phone in their first words. The responses were predictable.

- *Oh, God, another rainy morning!*
- *I wish I didn't have to go to work today.*
- *My wife is still sleeping, I will get up quietly.*
- *I wonder if X will have lunch with me at the office today?*
- *I've got two loads of laundry to do before sending the kids off to school and going to work.*
- *Oh, good! The Yankees won again.*

After each caller spoke, the two hosts said clever things and laughed. Then, out of the blue a caller said, "*Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and all your strength.*" At first the giddy twosome didn't know what to say, but after a few moments of awkward silence, they hung up and one said, "*Must be wrong number. Next!*" They laughed and moved onto the next call.

Religious people do have a different sense of what should be done on rising, on retiring, before meals and on their Sabbaths. Rabbis and ministers since ancient times have advised us to greet and bless God, to ask for God's mercies during the day and week, to thank God for the food that sustains us, for the work that gives life meaning, and for the many good things we have been given. I have found the Lord's Prayer several times a day is a good vehicle for expressing this obligation. Others read Psalms or prayer books before adding private petitions. For me such prayers help focus my mind on what is truly important during the next fifteen or so hours and a reminder that I am not alone as I face the day's challenges. Prayers like these are ways we express love for God and offer ourselves to God. Worshipping in church helps start my week on the right foot, allowing me to think about what happened the past week and to consider the opportunities and obligations of discipleship in the week to come. Such acts of devotion align my mind with God's intentions for me and are a primary way I practice Jesus' first commandment.

In the Gospel lesson this morning a scribe asked Jesus a question in the Temple. Others had been arguing with Jesus, trying to catch him. But this fellow seemed different. We are told

this scribe had heard the disputation and saw that Jesus replied with wise and good answers. He asked a question of his own: “*What is the greatest commandment of all?*” Jesus answered in the way many rabbis of the time would have also answered, by quoting, “*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 might.*”¹ (His answer was quote from Deuteronomy 6:4.) Jesus then added another prescription from the Hebrew Scripture, from the holiness code in Leviticus: “*And the second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*”² The scribe was impressed and told Jesus he was right, saying that to practice the love of God and love of neighbor was “much more important than ... burnt offerings and sacrifices.”³ After this, Mark wrote:

When Jesus saw that [the scribe] answered wisely, he said to him, “*You are not far from the Kingdom of God.*” After than no one dared to ask [Jesus] any question.⁴

I am sure most of you have noticed our church has an easier time with the second part of Jesus’ reply to the scribe. We are good at loving neighbors and we think that is the essence of Christianity. Our church promotes it, practices it, and provides opportunities to accomplish it. But what of the first part of Jesus’ answer—to love God with all one’s heart, soul, mind and strength? Do we even know where to start, what it means, how to do it?

One step is where we began the sermon by praying at regular intervals each day, placing ourselves in God’s hands, inviting God to give us new perspective, new energy for good deeds and listening for God’s direction in our lives. A second step is spending time with God and with God’s friends, fellow Christians in worship and koinonia. A third step is doing what Jesus and the scribe were doing: read and help one another understand scripture. By searching the Word of God we discover direction and guidance. A fourth step is in some ways a summation of the first three: we become disciples and follow him. These four steps are the path to loving God.

What is little grasped today is that these two commandments always work together. It is not enough to love God without loving neighbors. Nor is it enough to love neighbors and fail to love God. The two depend on each other. When we love a neighbor, we love God in that neighbor. If we love God there is no way we will not also practice love for our neighbors whom God also loves. It is when we try to separate the two loves that Christianity becomes fractured and ineffective.

What strikes me about the scribe’s interaction with Jesus is just how simple Christianity is. What does being a follower of Jesus require?

¹ Mark 12:29-30.

² Mark 12:31 and Leviticus 19:18.

³ Mark 12:33.

⁴ Mark 12:34.

1. Pray at regular intervals every day.
2. Worship God with your fellow Christians each Sabbath.
3. Do not neglect to come together with your Christian family often and routinely. Pray for your fellow church members and ministers.
4. Read and study God's Word with other disciples.
5. Love your neighbors, God's children, at every opportunity.

If we do this, we *'are not far from the Kingdom of God.'* We should remember it at the start of each day, at retiring, before we eat a meal, every Sunday.

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 might. And the second [commandment] is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

Today is All Saints Day. It is a day we remember in the second service those who have died in the past year. As I read the names each year I think about odd things. One of my thoughts is what do we the living owe them, the dead? They have worked to provide us this congregation. They kept it together in their generation. If it depends now on you and me, will we do as good a job as they did? What was their secret? *To love God and one another.* They understood that secret spiritual power and that is their legacy and admonition for us.

End

To Love God. DOC