

Not far

Mark 12:28-34

November 1, 2009

It was one of those moments, one of those bright and shining moments that make it all worth while.

You know what I mean! Most of the time you just go about your business, following the routine. Sometimes it's tedious. Sometimes it's frustrating. It is often exhausting, sometimes satisfying. But you do what you do, day after day, because you have to and because you want to, whether or not you're noticed, whether or not you're appreciated. You just do it.

But then, in a moment, you are transfixed, you are transformed, your life is lifted out of the ordinary!

You get an email from a former student ...

Hi, Mrs. E! I just want you to know how important everything I learned in your class is to me now that I have my own classroom. You gave me ideas I could use, and they work!

Or you get a phone call from a client ...

Hello, Keith. I know you'll say you're just doing your job, but I want you to know how much I appreciate you going the extra mile. You really listen to my concerns and you get back to me right away with the answer or at least to tell me you're working on it. I don't get that kind of personal attention anywhere else!

Or you're doing the supper dishes and, out of the blue, your daughter turns away from the TV screen and says ...

Mom, I love you!

For Jesus, it must have been one of those bright and shining moments. He was having a rough day! A group of Jerusalem's leading intellectuals and power brokers had descended on him determined to do their best to trip him up, to paint him into a corner, to expose him, to discredit him.

They asked him about paying taxes to the empire, figuring he'd implicate himself either way. If he advised paying the tax, he'd seem no more than an apologist for the status quo with nothing new to offer to a people suffering

under the empire's heavy hand. But if he publicly counseled tax evasion, he'd appear a troublemaker, a dangerous insurgent, not someone with whom people would want to be associated.

But Jesus had them show him a coin engraved with the Emperor's image, and gave them this remarkable answer:

Pay to the Emperor what belongs to the Emperor, and pay to God what belongs to God.

Then others from the group, Sadducees, asked him a question about resurrection, trying to make Jesus look foolish. They spun a tale of a woman married consecutively to seven brothers. They wondered whose wife she would be when they were all raised to life.

This question Jesus answered not with wisdom, but with anger, realizing their scoffing denied God's power and made God look foolish. He told them they didn't know what they were talking about, that those who are raised are like angels in heaven and do not marry, and that the God who is called the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob is God of the living and not the dead!

Then, out of the blue, came this question:

Which commandment is the most important of all?

This question was sincere. This rabbi really wanted to know. Without hesitation, Jesus answered:

The most important one is this: "Listen, Israel! The Lord our God is the only Lord. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." The second most important commandment is this: "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." There is no other commandment more important than these two.

Well done, Teacher! the Jewish rabbi answered.

In the midst of all the jealousy, all the conflict, all the plotting, all the misunderstanding, there was for Jesus this bright and shining moment. This rabbi knew what mattered most to God and knew Jesus knew. They were on the same page! Together they understood the heart of the Law and the cries of God's prophets. God wants justice, not burnt offerings! God wants love, not songs of praise!

It was a bright and shining moment!

You are not far from the Kingdom of God, Jesus told him.

Not far? Not far? Isn't that like saying, "That's a pretty good answer"? Why didn't Jesus say, "Yes! You've got it! You're there!"?

Not far? It seems a strange thing to say. What did Jesus mean by it? I don't know! But I will suggest a few possibilities of what Jesus may have meant. Maybe you'll have some ideas, too!

Maybe when Jesus said, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God," he was talking in terms of time. Maybe he meant: "The Kingdom is not far off." There was from the beginning a sense of urgency and immediacy in Jesus' message:

Repent! The kingdom of God is at hand!

The day of the Lord for which we have been waiting is at the door, so get ready! Turn your life around! God's Kingdom is coming!

Maybe he was just staying on message. You are close! We are close! And your words, your good understanding, of what God desires most shows you're ready. You're ready to embrace God's Kingdom when it comes. You're ready to live the Kingdom way. You are not far from the Kingdom of God. We are not far from the Kingdom of God!

Maybe that's what Jesus meant ...

Or maybe when Jesus said, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God," he meant: "Your answer is not far off." Maybe he meant to let this rabbi know that his answer was a good one, but it was not yet complete. Because love that is a matter of words alone is no love at all.

It is a good thing to know that loving God with heart and mind and strength matters more than anything else, but knowing it isn't doing it.

It is a good thing to know that God calls you to love your neighbor as you love yourself, but knowing you should love your neighbor is a very different thing from actually loving him. Love happens in the trenches, in the highways and the hedges, in kitchens and streets and courtrooms and boardrooms.

Can love really have anything to do with running a business? With running a country? With finding the best solutions to intractable problems, political and social and economic as well as personal?

If it can't, if it doesn't, then love really means very little after all. George MacLeod, the founder of the Iona Community, got it right when he said:

The true mark of Christian spirituality is to get one's teeth into things. Painstaking service to humankind's most material needs is the essence of spirituality.

Loving God is not just about singing praises, but about redirecting your energy and money and time and passion toward the things, toward the people, that matter to God. Loving your neighbor is more than a matter of feeling sympathy. It is about making yourself -- your self -- available, about putting your self on the line. It's about giving and forgiving, about showing kindness and showing mercy, about refusing to pass judgment and refusing to remain silent in the face of injustice.

But all this is still just a lot of words! Don't nod your head today. Love your neighbor tomorrow! Be patient with your son. Visit your sick friend. Try to understand the quiet anger of the poor. Refuse to pass judgement or to speak ill of your enemy. Be generous with your time and your money. Then you will be not far from the Kingdom of God!

Maybe that's what Jesus meant ...

Or maybe when Jesus said, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God," he meant: "You ... are not far." Maybe he wouldn't say, "You're there!," because you can't get there by yourself! We do not make our way into the kingdom of God one by one by one. We go together, or not at all! You are not far!

I was talking about this with Greg and Julie in staff meeting this week. To say, "Yes, you have it! Yes, you are there!" would be to make of this rabbi a saint, an exemplary believer, or, of us, of you or me, an exemplary Christian. But we agreed, Greg and Julie and I agreed, there are no exemplary Christians! Not one! Every great Christian, every saint, every one of us, is covered with warts, physical and spiritual. We all have our weaknesses. We all have our flaws.

But that's not an indictment of our faith. It is a validation of our faith! We are not saints, just Christians, just ordinary, flawed, weak, doubting, sinful human beings, choosing to cast our lot with Jesus, to go where he is going, to go with him and with all those who go with him.

It's not about individual perfection, but about relationship, about love.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as you love yourself.

We're in this together. How could I possibly enter the Kingdom of God while leaving my neighbor behind? It would be an oxymoron, a betrayal of what the Kingdom is about in the first place!

Maybe that's what Jesus meant ...

Well done, Teacher! It is true, as you say, that only the Lord is God and that there is no other god but he. And to love God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, is more important than to offer animals and other sacrifices to God.

Yes! You are on the right track! You know what we must do! You know what we must become ... together! You are not far from the Kingdom of God!