

## **You are not far**

Mark 12:28-34

November 1, 2015

*You are not far from the kingdom of God.*

How I wish it were true! But we seem far, so very far from that day. So very far from the day when wolves and sheep live together in peace. So very far from the day when swords are hammered into plows. So very far from the day when the blind see, the the lame walk, and the hungry, all those who are hungry, are well-fed. So very far from the day when there are no more tears, because there is no more death or grief or pain. So very far from the day when we need no houses of worship because God is right here among us!

And I am far, I seem so very far from the kingdom of God. So often preoccupied with my own concerns. Holding on to hurts, instead of forgiving them and letting them go. Controlled by fear as much as by faith, fearing rejection, fearing loss, fearing that what I am and what I do won't matter.

*You are not far from the kingdom of God.*

Jesus said that to a teacher of the Law, a rabbi, an especially perceptive rabbi and an especially sincere rabbi, not like his colleagues, the other rabbis, who asked Jesus questions to trap him, to trip him up, to try to make him hang himself with his own words, to give the crowds good reason to be suspicious of him and to give them good reason to condemn him. Kind of like the presidential debate moderators?

No, this rabbi watched Jesus give good answers to these leading questions. He was so impressed with Jesus' wisdom and clarity and faith, that he was impelled to ask Jesus his own question -- "Which commandment is the most important of all?" -- not to trick him, not to test him, but to see if Jesus and he were indeed on the same page. And they were. Jesus gave his answer and the rabbi commended him and Jesus commended his commendation and told him: "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

*You are not far from the kingdom of God.*

You -- this wise religious leader, this honest rabbi, this faithful Jew. But not because he was a teacher, not because he was an especially sincere teacher, not because he was an especially good Jew, but because he understood. Because he understood that love matters most. And who is capable of love? Who among you is capable of love? We are all capable of love!

There is no hierarchy in the kingdom of God. A child has as much chance to enter God's kingdom as an adult. In fact, Jesus suggests there are advantages to being a child or being like a child. A poor man has as much chance to enter the kingdom of God as a rich man. In fact, Jesus suggests the poor man has a distinct advantage! In the kingdom of God, those who put themselves last will be first and those who want to lead must serve, and a blind man sees what seeing people cannot.

Which is all to say, there is no hierarchy in the kingdom of God. Nobody enjoys any kind of advantage by birth or social status or skill or wealth. Anyone can draw near, anyone who understands that love matters most.

Loving your neighbor matters most, loving your neighbor as you love yourself. This is not hard! You know who your neighbor is. You know what love is. And you know what it means love yourself.

What do you see when you look in the mirror? What do you see when you look deep into the depths of your own soul? You may feel inadequate, you may feel ashamed, you may feel embarrassed or doubtful or disappointed, but you want what is good. You want good for yourself. You want joy. You want freedom. You want fulfillment. You want purpose. You want to be good. You want to matter. You want to matter to somebody.

That's what it means to love yourself, to desire the best for yourself whatever your circumstances. Loving your neighbor means the same: to desire her joy, her freedom, her fulfillment, her goodness. You want her to know that she matters, and by loving her, she will know that she does matter, at least to you. Loving your neighbor means recognizing that you live in a world populated by more than one person. More than one person! Loving your neighbor means seeing not just another face in the crowd, but a person.

Loving God matters most, loving the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. What is left over? Nothing! You don't give God a portion of your love. You give God everything!

Then how can you love your neighbor, how can you love your wife, how can you love your children, if you've already given away all your love to God? You can because love is not a zero-sum commodity. Love grows as it is given away, and when it is given away to God, it grows infinitely.

You know what love is, and even though you may not know who God is, as you love God -- before all else, above all else -- you will get know who God is. The more you love God, the more you will know God, because you will understand that God is love.

This matters most! Loving God matters most -- more than knowing, more than serving, more than making sacrifices, more than duty, more than integrity, more than goodness. God wants you -- your heart, your soul, your mind, your strength.

And when you understand this, you are not far. You are not far from the kingdom of God. When you understand this. When you want this.

The rabbi offered Jesus no proof that he indeed loved God with all his heart, no proof that he loved his neighbor, loved each of his neighbors, as he loved himself. Jesus told him he was not far from the kingdom of God, not because he had succeeded at being loving, but because he believed love matters most.

Do you believe love matters most? No matter who you are or where you are along the path of learning how to love fully and completely, do you believe that loving God and loving the human being next to you matters more than anything else? Then you too are not far from the kingdom of God!