

October 31, 2021
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Mark 12:28b-34

One of the scribes came to Jesus and asked him, "Which is the first of all the commandments?" Jesus replied, "The first is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, 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."



The scribe said to him, "Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, 'He is One and there is no other than he.' And 'to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself' is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." And when Jesus saw that he answered with understanding, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." And no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Background

The text for last week's gospel was Mark's account of Jesus' healing of Bartimaeus. That text ended the tenth chapter of Mark's Gospel. The eleventh chapter begins with a description of Jesus' entry to Jerusalem (Mark 11:1-11). The rest of the chapter follows with other events that are leading up to Jesus' crucifixion; cursing a fruitless fig tree (Mark 11:12-14, 20-25); the chasing of the merchants from the temple (Mark 11:15-19); and the questioning of Jesus' authority by the Jewish religious authorities (Mark 11:27-33). In chapter twelve Mark describes Jesus telling the parable of tenant farmers who refused to give the owner his share of the harvest (Mark 12:1-12); the Pharisees joining with the supporters of Herod in efforts to trap Jesus with questions about paying taxes (Mark 12:13-17); and the Sadducees trying to embarrass him with questions about life after death (Mark 12:18-27). These encounters lead to the text for this Sunday -- Mark's account of the scribe coming to Jesus with his question about the greatest commandment.

Unlike most of the questions addressed to Jesus, this scribe approaches Jesus with respect, seeking his opinion. One thing that stands out in this text is a lack of hostility between the scribe and Jesus, especially given where this text is located within the gospel. Here Jesus' response is short, direct, and to the point. The scribe compliments Jesus' insights and rephrases Jesus' teaching in his own words, a gesture of respect. Jesus' comment recognizes that the scribe is not just restating what he has heard, but has made it his own belief. "You are not far from the Kingdom of God."

Jesus' response to the scribe's question is not new. He draws on two texts from the Hebrew scriptures: Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. While Jesus' answer draws on texts from the Hebrew tradition, the uniqueness of Jesus' answer is that he combines two different texts, something that rabbis never did. Those who heard Jesus' response would also hear it as a call to treat people with the same respect that they treated God. For them, love was not about how one felt, but honor showed by one's action. This point is made even more strongly by the way Jesus and this scribe have been able to treat each other in this dialogue, given the growing tension that is characteristic of others who represent religious and Roman authority at this point in Mark's gospel.

Reflection Questions

1. Are you a person who is affected by the possibility or likelihood of a confrontive situation? In what ways might that affect you?
2. Try to put yourself in this scripture passage. Tensions are high. People are talking, wondering what will happen next. Jesus seems to be acting more boldly. You see a lone scribe coming down the path toward Jesus. How do you respond to this situation? When you listen as the scribe speaks to Jesus, what thoughts go through you? How would you respond?
3. You hear Jesus' response: first one familiar line... and then a second. What are you thinking now? What do you think the Scribe will say? Then he responds to Jesus. What do you hear in his response? Jesus then speaks again to the scribe. How have their faces changed, the stance, the tone of their voice in this short dialogue? How have you changed from when you first saw the scribe approaching Jesus?
4. What would be going on inside you as you hear their conversation?
5. If you were asked what is the most important commandment, what would you say?
6. Jesus says the first commandment is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength." And the second is "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." As you live your life, is there balance in your love for God and your love for your neighbor?
7. Do you love yourself? How is this made apparent? How does that compare with your love for others?
8. Can you talk with God about your own desire to love God, or your neighbor, or yourself?

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