

On Being ‘Not Far’ from the Kingdom of God

Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Mark 12:28-34

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Regardless of who wins in the mid-term elections on Tuesday, I suspect all of the candidates will be glad the election is over. Imagine how stressful the last few months have been for the candidates and their families. They are under the watchful eye of the media every moment of the day, trying not to make a reckless blunder, careful not to provide a damaging sound bite, or an embarrassing photo op. And while the candidates and their organizers are surely being extremely careful, some are hoping to embarrass them with “gotcha questions.”

And then there are those other questions presented to the candidates. These questions come from real people on Main Street many of whom are facing difficult times. The working mom who says that she and her three children are without health insurance. “What can you do to help us?” she pleads. Or the man who has been out of work for a year and is growing despondent. “I need work,” he insists. “What can you do to help me?”

Two different kinds of questions. One is a gotcha question, a trap. It is disingenuous. Its purpose is to tear down, to undermine. It never intends to advance understanding or facilitate progress. This kind of question represents an ugly side of politics. The other kind of question comes from a different place. From the heart, or perhaps from the gut. It’s not a trap. It doesn’t wish to embarrass or catch someone off guard. No, its purpose is to find an answer. Its purpose is to find some hope.

We see both kinds of questions in Mark 12. The first is from a group of Pharisees. It was a gotcha question. They conspired to trap Jesus by asking him this question: “Teacher, ... is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” It wasn’t a burning theological question, for sure. It wasn’t even a relevant question. It was a trap. Mark confirms that by calling them hypocrites.

Later a group of Sadducees asked a similar gotcha question. Theirs was about the afterlife, something they didn't even believe in. Their question went something like this: if a woman was married multiple times on earth, each time outliving her husband, in the afterlife whose wife will she be? Now that's a real head-scratcher! I think I would have punted that one. It was a trap. They did not genuinely want to know the answer to the question. They wanted a sound bite. They wanted to see Jesus trip over a difficult question.

Then in our text for today Jesus was asked a third question. This question was different, coming from a different place, I believe. It was not a trap, no effort to embarrass or trip him. It was a scribe, Mark says, who asked it. He overheard Jesus' conversations with the Pharisees and Sadducees and was impressed with Jesus' ability to answer them. His question, I believe, came from a deep place in his life. He needed an honest answer, so he asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

Don't we all have a question or two residing deep within that we would like to ask Jesus? I do. Some day I hope to ask why some children are born with cognitive deficiencies that rob them of a meaningful life. That's not a gotcha question for me. It rises from my heart, from my gut. You may have a question like that, too. Lord, what do you believe about sexual orientation? That is a deep, burning question for some. Why, Lord, is there so much injustice in the world? Why do so many people suffer?

"Which commandment is the first of all?" this scribe wanted to know. The scribes counted 613 commandments in the Torah. Many looked for ways to summarize them into one great truth. An unbeliever once asked the ancient Jewish teacher Hillel if he could summarize the Law such that he could teach him the whole Law while standing on one foot. Here is Hillel's response, "What you yourself hate, do not do to your neighbor: this is the whole Law, the rest is commentary. Go and learn it." Not bad!

Here is Jesus' response to this scribe's honest question:

The first is, "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." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Then Jesus added this: “There is no other commandment greater than these.”

The scribe agreed with Jesus and then added something the Pharisees and Sadducees would not have agreed with. This is important. I really think this is the key to understanding why the scribe’s question was so important to him. The scribe admitted, “This is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Now, that was a bombshell. The scribe was saying that Jesus’ teaching about love—love God, love others, love self—was more important than the Jewish sacrificial system, which was central to Judaism at that time. On prescribed days, faithful Jews traveled to Jerusalem to present their goats, sheep, and birds as offerings. The animals were slaughtered on the altar at the temple. Their blood flowed for days and was believed to appease the anger of God.

Consider this. I wonder if this scribe had come to doubt all of that. I wonder if he had begun to question whether the killing of all those animals was really a religious act. If so, he was doubting a fundamental precept of his religion.

I love Jesus’ response. Have you ever paid attention to what Jesus said to this man? I suspect it causes some Baptists to stumble. According to Mark, Jesus considered this man’s response to be wise. The Greek word that is translated “wisely” in this text is not used anywhere else in the New Testament. Jesus said to this man who answered wisely, “You are *not far* from the kingdom of God.”

Not far? I thought people were either *in* or *out* of the kingdom. I don’t recall ever being taught in seminary that you could be *not far* from the kingdom. What did Jesus mean by that? Is it possible that this wise scribe was beginning to see the true meaning of faith? It wasn’t really about slaughtering animals, no matter how earnest one was when doing so. Was he awakening to the reality that real faith is about love? Love of God. Love of others. Love of one’s self. Maybe the sun was beginning to rise in this man’s life. He was beginning to see flickers of light over the horizon. A beam of new light here. A splash of light there. The day had not yet dawned for him, but it was coming. You’re not far, Jesus told him. You’re not far from the kingdom of God.

I have a much greater appreciation for that now than I did at an earlier time in my life. There are some people for whom the terms “in” and “out” of the kingdom are not appropriate. It’s more appropriate to say of them “you’re not far from the kingdom.” These people are not disingenuous. These are not the ones who are constantly setting traps to stump the preacher or confuse the issue. They’re not trying to undermine or tear down. They genuinely want to know the truth, and their questions rise from a deep place, from their gut.

Maybe you would say that describes you. You’re not far from the kingdom. Maybe you grew up in the faith, went to Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, learned the stories of our faith, but as an adult you have gone through a time of questioning, doubting. Some of the beliefs that you could accept easily as a child you cannot accept easily anymore. Perhaps you feel like you just don’t fit. You don’t feel fully in the kingdom, but then you don’t feel fully out either. Maybe you feel like the man who cried out to Jesus once, “Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief.” That’s raw honesty. Sometimes our faith is a mixture, isn’t it? Certainly, there’s some belief. And, yes, there is some unbelief too. You’re not far from the kingdom.

Unfortunately, we don’t know what happened to this scribe. I’ll tell you what I think. People like him, who are courageous enough to do the difficult work of doubting, who are courageous enough to ask the deep questions, and who genuinely want to find the truth, those people normally find what they’re looking for. So continue to question. Continue to search. Remain open. You are wiser than you may realize. And my prayer for you is that the sun will rise upon you, and you will find yourself in the kingdom of God.

Closing Prayer

Lord, thank you for this scribe who was not far from the kingdom. And thank you for these here who also are not far from your kingdom. May the day break upon us all. Amen.