

NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

May 24, 2009

Then the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' – this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:32-34).

People are always trying to test Jesus.

In the New Testament they set traps for him, like the two in Mark's gospel right before this morning's text. Some Pharisees and partisans of the king ask whether it's lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. They start by buttering him up: "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and show no partiality, and teach the way of God. Tell us then, should we pay taxes to Caesar or not?" If Jesus says yes, he'll anger the zealots who want to get rid of the Romans; and if he says no, they can charge him with sedition, as an enemy of the state.

But people are less clever than they think when they try to pull things over on Jesus. He says, "Why are you putting me to the test?" Partly he means that he's spotted the trap, but he's also asking, "Who are *you* to be testing *me*? If you knew who I am, you'd know that the testing runs in the other direction." Jesus says, "Bring me a coin. Whose head is on the coin? Caesar's? Then give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." They're amazed, and that shuts them up.

But only till the next paragraph. Then some Sadducees appear. The Sadducees don't believe in the resurrection of the dead, for the same reason some people today don't believe: because the evidence is slim, apart from faith. So they spin this tale to show how dumb Jesus is for believing in an afterlife. "Teacher, Moses said that if a man's brother dies leaving a wife but no child, he must marry the widow and have children with her for the sake of his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one died and left a wife with no children, so the second brother married her. Then he died, and the third brother married the widow. Then he died Well, you get the picture. The woman had seven husbands. So whose wife will she be in heaven?"

The Sadducees think they're very clever to have come up with this argument against heaven. But Jesus is less impressed with them than they are with themselves. He says, "You don't know either the scriptures or the power of God. In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, so your question is moot. And besides, God told Moses that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God is God of the living, not the dead, so by implication, your forefathers and mothers are alive. You don't know what you're talking about."

Twice in half a chapter, Jesus dodges traps set by people who think they are much smarter than they really are. Now another scribe has been listening to all this. He's seen how wise Jesus is and how dumb everyone else looks by comparison. So this scribe asks, not to trap Jesus but because he really wants to know, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

Jesus says, the first commandment is the Shema from Deuteronomy (the same one rabbinic Judaism says comes first): "'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 with all your strength.' That's the first and the greatest commandment. And the second is, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' No other commandment is greater than these."

The scribe thinks for a minute, and he says, "You're right, Teacher! Those are the most important things – far more important than all the sacrifices and burnt offerings." Now Jesus is impressed. Finally, someone

really wants to know the truth, instead of bending the truth to fit his own agenda. So Jesus says to the scribe, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

The key to the kingdom is love. Loving God and loving your neighbor unlocks everything else. And the kingdom of God is not far away. It’s not beyond some distant galaxy in the heavens. It’s not even on the other side of death. It’s right here, right next to us, even in a sense, inside us. Celtic spirituality talks about “thin places,” where the fabric of reality in this world is so thin you can almost see through it to another reality that’s all around us, but mostly invisible, except to the saints.

Whoever loves God and neighbor lives right on the edge of heaven. Religion is not primarily about rituals, though rituals give shape to faith and remind us of things we need to remember. The scribe doesn’t say that rituals don’t matter; he just knows that what matters most is love. Everything else points to love, because love *is* the point.

The whole secret to life is well-ordered love. Wise people love the right things, in the right order, and in the right way. Most of our problems arise when we love the wrong things, or we love the right things in the wrong way.

When I was in college they had a pennant that said, “For God, for Country, and for Yale,” but the joke was always “not necessarily in that order.” Many people want to love God, but only in a way that doesn’t interfere with their other priorities.

Our fundamental commitment, of course, is to ourselves. That’s not all bad. It’s good to love ourselves, because God wants us to love all people, and we’re people too. The problem is that self-love gets in the way of other loves. Love is something like the force of gravity: its strength varies inversely with the square of the distance between the objects. In other words, we love ourselves the most, then the people who are emotionally closest to us, and then the force of love falls off quickly the farther people are away from us.

It’s natural for human beings to care mostly about ourselves and our family and friends, but from a Christian perspective, what’s natural is not the last word in morality. The fall of Adam and Eve, whether you understand it literally or metaphorically, means that human nature as we know it now is deeply messed up. What comes naturally to us is not always right. Vanity comes naturally to us, and greed, and envy, and lust, and wrath, and a host of other deadly sins. Human nature is deeply flawed, so it’s not enough to justify our behavior by saying “It’s only natural.” In Christ we have a new nature that we’re growing into, because the old nature is the cause of all our troubles.

When Jesus says “Love your neighbor as yourself,” he means we must want what’s best for our neighbor just as we want what’s best for ourselves. If my pleasure causes another person pain, I probably need to give up that pleasure for the other person’s sake. If my luxuries deprive another of life’s necessities, I should scale back and share at least enough to let the other live in dignity. Love is never just a sentiment for Jesus. The test of love is the way we live.

As we’ve said before, Jesus’ idea of the neighborhood is much larger than ours. When a lawyer, looking for loopholes, asks who is his neighbor, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan – which is to say that the neighbor is anyone who needs our help, including the one who is not like us, not from our own community.

And that brings us around, indirectly, to Memorial Day. On Memorial Day we remember those men and women who sacrificed their lives for our country, and for us. To some extent their sacrifice reflects the love of Jesus himself, who laid down his life to save us. It’s important that we remember them and honor them.

But it would be a mistake to stop there. National holidays draw us out of ourselves, and remind us of higher loyalties. But if our vision stops at our own boundaries, if our devotion does not reach all the way to God, and if our love does not extend to all those for whom Christ died, then even our holidays can become just another kind of disordered love.

When we love God and our neighbors as ourselves, we are not far from the kingdom of God, which is our soul's true home. Any other land we belong to is temporary. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away," Jesus says. Of course we love our country. People everywhere love their country. But the great temptation is to give to Caesar what belongs only to God: our very highest loyalty, and our deepest devotion.

One of the ironies of national holidays is that, in raising our sights above ourselves, they can set our sights too low. Our holidays can keep us from seeing that all God's people in every land are as dear to God as we are, and they are our neighbors too, and so we must love them as we love ourselves.

If we love God first, with everything that is in us, then all our other loves will fall into place, in the order and in the way that they belong. We'll love our country, and we'll love our family and friends, but we'll love all God's people too – not only in sentiment, but concretely in the way we live. And when we do that, we will not be far from the kingdom of God.