

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

It would be helpful, I think, to set the scene for today's conversation between Jesus and the scribe who questions him.

The second half of Mark's Gospel basically focuses on Jesus' traveling toward Jerusalem and the fate that awaits him there. Today's Gospel takes place in the Jerusalem temple. Jesus has arrived and it won't be long before the events of his passion and death begin to unfold.

Upon arriving at the temple Jesus encounters several groups of people who have heard of him and try, by various means, to put him in his place:

- chief priests and scribes demanding to know where he thinks he gets his authority to do and preach as he does;
- Herodians and Pharisees trying to trap him with a question about paying taxes;
- the Saducees posing a ridiculous hypothetical question about a woman made to marry seven brothers in succession and whose wife she will be in heaven.

I'm sure Jesus got tired of all that quite quickly.

And then comes this lone scribe who asks about the greatest commandment. This was a typical question posed to rabbis and was basically an attempt to boil down the entire law into its basic necessity.

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Jesus plays along, recognizing that here, at least, is a person who seems sincere. He responds to the question with a passage from Deuteronomy that is the most ancient prayer of the Jewish people and one that he probably learned from his foster father Joseph before he could even read. It was the ancient Jewish version of “All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten.”

“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 commandment that Jesus cites is also found in the Hebrew Scriptures, in the book of Leviticus

‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

When the scribe affirms Jesus’ response and basically says that he has arrived at the same conclusion, Jesus offers him the words of encouragement, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Why only “not far?” The answer might be in Jesus’ recognition that the scribe had answered with “understanding.” The word “understanding” here has to do with the head more than the heart. What we know in our heads, though, does not necessarily lead to commitment.

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<story of the scripture prof who passes the friars on the road on the way to school>

Judged on the first quote from Deuteronomy, the scribe has mastered the soul or mind, but had not yet demonstrated how his knowledge would be into action.

St. James, in his letter, puts the issue this way, “Be doers of the word and not hearers only...”

We don't know the end of the story. Did the scribe go away feeling good about himself because he and Jesus had come to the same conclusion or did he take the next step and make a commitment to live out the commandment as Jesus was doing?

What we do know is that if we ask Christ what we should do, the answer will not stop with loving God with all our heart and knowing with God with all our soul and mind. It will also call for our whole strength as we put His teaching into action, into love of neighbor.

A daunting challenge to be sure. That's probably why Mark concluded by saying, “And no one dared to ask him any more questions.”

But it would be mean of Jesus to call us to do the impossible. As we confront the challenge of putting our faith and love into concrete action for the sake of our neighbor, we can trust on the strengthening power of the Holy Spirit, the same spirit of Jesus that kept him faithful to the

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mission the Father had given him in spite of all opposition.

We have no reason to be discouraged by the lack of strength our lives might have shown so far. We can commit ourselves again today to get back to these basics and live our lives in such a way that the kingdom of God is close at hand to us.