

Closing In on the Kingdom

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Mark 12:28-34

Jesus entered Jerusalem. There he claimed messianic authority over the Temple. There he faced down challenges to that authority. And there he sparred verbally with his opponents, obliquely warning them of the trouble they were courting, setting aside their urgent questions as irrelevant.

One of the scribes came, and when he heard [Jesus and the Sadducees] debating and recognized that [Jesus] had given them a good response, he asked him, “Which is the most important commandment of all?” Jesus answered, “The most important is: ‘Israel, listen: the Lord our God – the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your life, with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ This is the second: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is more important than these.”

The scribe said to him, “Very good, teacher. You spoke truly that ‘he is one and there is no one beside him.’ And ‘to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your strength,’ and ‘to love your neighbor as yourself’ is far more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” Jesus recognized that he had given a thoughtful answer, so he said to him, “You’re not far from God’s kingdom.”

And no one dared to question him any more.

Children’s Story

For longer than anyone in the Great Forest could remember, except maybe for the Old Owl, Sammy the Squirrel’s family had lived in the Old Oak Tree. Sammy’s grandparents had lived there, and his great-grandparents, and his great-great-grandparents, as far back as anyone could remember.

But Sammy’s father had seen some cracks in the trunk of the Old Oak Tree. And those cracks were getting longer and wider. “I’m afraid the Old Oak Tree isn’t safe anymore,” he said. “We’ll have to move.” Move? How could Sammy’s family move? They had never lived anywhere else! How could they be a family if they moved?

But move is what they did. First to one tree, then to another, and after that to still another. One night a storm tore through the Great Forest, and The Old Oak Tree fell to the ground. It was a good thing that Sammy and his family had moved.

But they hadn’t found a new home yet. They were still moving from tree to tree to tree, never settling in. In time they figured out that they didn’t need a tree of their own to be the Squirrel family. Family was not where they lived. Family was who they were and what they did.

Sermon

Religious professionals use the phrase all the time. It has all the insider resonance of any good piece of jargon. And we never have to explain it to other religious professionals. We all know what the phrase means. Lay people sometimes use the phrase, too, not exactly sure of the details, the same way the average person talks about CT scans and PSA levels. The phrase? *Kingdom of God*.

How many times you’ve heard that phrase! And how often you’ve wondered what it really means! *Kingdom of God*. You have some sense of the meaning, of course. Hear a phrase often enough and you do catch on. But it probably has never been clearly explained to you or even clearly described or described at all, except in the vaguest terms. Blame the religious professionals for that. Though, in our defense, we don’t describe it all that clearly among ourselves. And besides that, even the Bible doesn’t give the neatest, clearest picture of the Kingdom of God. Jesus said to the scribe, “You’re not far from God’s kingdom.” But what does that mean?

A few days earlier, Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem. It had been an intense and tumultuous few days. And the intensity would only be increasing. Opponents and enemies were circling around Jesus, making their plots, biding their time, getting ready for the kill. And Jesus did nothing to dissuade them. Fact is, he kept riling them up.

Look at what was going on. Jerusalem was the heart of Israel. It was the royal city, the center of every hope and expectation. And a few days earlier, on Palm Sunday, Jesus had ridden into town like a king. Humble, yes. But God's king was always to be humble. Humble, yes. But acclaimed by crowds of festival pilgrims as the Son of David. So Jesus had come to Israel's royal city and come like a king.

Then straightaway he went from the heart of Israel, the royal city, to its soul, to the Temple. Jerusalem was the seat of Israel's king; the Temple was the seat of Israel's God. There, through burnt offerings and sacrifices and through a host of religious practices – there the people of Israel met with God. But now Jesus had asserted himself as some kind of authority over the Temple, driving out the Temple businessmen with condemning words from the prophets on his lips.

This was a challenge, this was a threat to the religious structure in Israel and a threat to those who served that structure. And Jesus did more than that. He spoke openly to condemn the scribes and their practices. (They did have a habit of mixing piety with exploitation of the poor.) He spoke in parables to warn every servant of the religious structure that their days were numbered. And to top it off, he spoke openly to say that the Temple would soon be destroyed, with not one stone left standing upon another.

In private, the same theme was even more apparent. He cursed a fig tree that outwardly was healthy and beautiful, yet it had no fruit. And then he told his disciples that with faith and prayer they could toss the Temple mountain into the sea, where it would be as finished as that fruitless fig tree. Dangerous actions. Dangerous words.

In the middle of all this, a scribe (an expert in Torah, the Law of Moses) came to Jesus with a question. It's hard to pin down the motives and attitude of this scribe. Some people questioned Jesus in order to test his orthodoxy. Some did it to trip him up. Few people questioned him with good intentions. But this scribe . . . It's hard to know. On the one hand, he put his question to Jesus without so much as a "hello" first. In other words, there's no evidence of honor or respect for Jesus. On the other hand, Mark reports that the scribe had some positive regard for Jesus, both in his debate with the Sadducees and in their own ensuing discussion. So, was this scribe testing Jesus, trying to trip him up? Or was he hoping to find something in Jesus that he had found nowhere else? It's hard to know.

His question, though, was not unfamiliar in the first century. Rabbis often debated over what teachings formed the foundation of biblical faith, the foundation on which everything else was built. The scribe's question, then, was both familiar and orthodox, getting to the heart of things: "Which is the most important commandment of all?"

Six hundred thirteen commandments. The Rabbis had counted. There were six hundred thirteen commandments in the Torah. But which of those was most important? That was the question. Again, a not unfamiliar question. And various answers were on offer. Perhaps most famous was the answer of Rabbi Hillel. A Gentile challenged him once. He said, "I'll convert, if you can tell me the whole Law while I stand here on one foot." To which Hillel replied, "What you hate for yourself, don't do to your neighbor. This is the whole Law. The rest is commentary. Go and learn."

Jesus, for his part, answered the question simply, "Love God completely and love your neighbor as yourself," quoting from Deuteronomy and from Leviticus. Then he added, "No other commandment is more important than these." It was not an unusual answer.

What is unusual is this. God in the flesh, the one whose coming reveals the three-part diversity at the heart of God's nature, that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – he says here that Israel's God is one. This actually is an important hint for understanding Jesus' concluding remark to the scribe. We'll come back to that shortly.

Six hundred thirteen commandments, and Jesus singled out the most important one, as well as an inseparable second one. (Other Scripture makes clear why the second one is inseparable from the first. Simply put, you can't love God without also loving your neighbor, who bears God's image.) Jesus gave his answer, and the scribe approved. "Very good, teacher," he said, offering both approval and honor.

Now, here's where it gets interesting. The scribe paraphrases Jesus' response approvingly. "You spoke truly," he says, "that God is the one and only." Then the scribe moves on to the double love commandments, citing them a little differently than Jesus, but the point is the same. Finally he adds this: The two love commandments are "far more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." That's when Jesus says, "You're not far from God's kingdom." The question is, how did Jesus get to that conclusion? What do the scribe's remarks have to do with God's kingdom and with being close to it?

Let's put some pieces together. In context, Jesus has been speaking and acting against the Temple. The days of the Temple and of its guardians are numbered. The Temple will no longer be the place of God's presence, not in Israel, not in the world. And now here the scribe has diminished the importance of "all burnt offerings and sacrifices." In other words, he has soundly diminished the importance of the Temple, which is the place of offerings and sacrifices.

Here's how the scribe has come to be "not far from God's kingdom." Rather than serving God's kingdom, the Temple had become an impediment to God's kingdom. Now God was in the process of setting that Temple aside, setting it aside in favor of something different, something better, setting it aside in favor of a new way, a new place for God to be present in Israel and in the world. By seeing the diminished place of the Temple, the scribe was not far from seeing and embracing the new place of God's presence. "Not far from God's kingdom"? God's kingdom was standing right in front of him! The person who says, "God is one," is God, come in the flesh. The person who says, "You're not far from God's kingdom," is the king, the one through whom the kingdom comes. That's what the scribe was closing in on.

Now I've done it. Again and again I've said, "Kingdom of God." But I haven't explained it, and I haven't described it. I haven't provided anything like a clearer picture of what is a central article of our faith. Shouldn't I be able to do better than that?

In my defense, Jesus doesn't explain the kingdom or give detailed descriptions of it. Usually he gives some indicators of what the kingdom is not. And then he tells stories to hint at what the kingdom is. *God's kingdom is like a hidden treasure . . . God's kingdom is like a farmer sowing seed in his field . . .*

So from today's Gospel reading, we might say – here, at last, is the payoff! – that the kingdom of God is not about the religious acts of religious professionals in religious buildings. We might say that the kingdom of God is not about the structures we build, whether of bricks or of doctrines or of rituals, to somehow be containers of God's presence with us and in the world. Rather the kingdom is present wherever people draw near to Jesus the Messiah through acts of love and devotion toward God and through acts of love and justice toward their neighbors.

Now, that sounds like standard "religion and spirituality" talk. But here's the difference. Jesus makes that kind of love, for God and for neighbor – Jesus makes that kind of love more than an ideal, an ideal that is always honored though never reached. He makes that kind of love possible and real. Because New Creation begins with his resurrection. And because he sends the Spirit of New Creation to his people. That Spirit, that Holy Spirit, makes us alive and sets us free to love, to love God and to love our neighbors. And in case you're wondering, "Who is our neighbor?" Jesus has a kingdom story to tell about that.