

Not Far

November 3, 2024

Ruth 1:1-18

Mark 12:28-34

We've taken a few steps since last week's Gospel lesson, set in Jericho along the banks of the River Jordan. Jesus had climbed the slopes from there to the environs of Jerusalem. He entered the city in that great Palm Sunday parade. He'd come back to the Temple the next day and overturned the tables of the money changers.

Mark sets this story on the next day, Tuesday, which began with the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders challenging Jesus' authority to do such things. That wasn't a good start, and the conversation deteriorated from there. Representatives of various schools of thought as well as various places on the political spectrum tried to trap Jesus into a statement that would put him in legal jeopardy on the one hand or cost him the support of the crowds who'd cheered him on the other. Preferably both at the same time.

Those efforts had failed.

"One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well he asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all?'"

Up to this point in Mark's Gospel, bad things have happened when Jerusalem scribes have been present. Jesus had his arguments with other religious leaders in Galilee, but when a group of scribes from Jerusalem showed up in chapter three, they accused him of being in league with demons. So you'd expect another "gotcha" question from this man.

He didn't ask one.

He asked a big question, for sure. Three centuries later, a rabbi named Simlai would count 613 mitvot or commandments in the Hebrew Bible. Most of those, obviously, amplify or provide detail of one or more of the Ten Commandments with which we're familiar. To choose one within the ten, or within the 613? That's a big question.

But he seems to have been interested in Jesus' answer, not in setting Jesus a trap. At least I think so, in great part because, unlike his responses to the bulk of the challenges Jesus received in chapters eleven and twelve, Jesus answered the question. Sort of. He cheated a little.

He replied with two commandments.

Both were near-quotes from the Scriptures first century Jews held in common: the five books that begin our Old Testament, known then and now in Hebrew as Torah, or Law. “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,” comes from Deuteronomy 6. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself,” comes from Leviticus 19.

As Cheryl Lindsay writes at UCC.org, “This exchange reminds the observer that the good news as shared by Jesus was not a clean departure from Jewish law. Rather, it was an amplification of it.”

When the scribe wholeheartedly agreed, Jesus told him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Not far.

Jesus’ basic message, as Mark described it back in chapter one, was, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” In one sense, then, Jesus could have told anyone that they were not far from the reign of God. It had come near, it has come near, to everyone.

But I don’t think that’s what he meant. I think he had a much older idea of the reign of God in mind, a reign of God in which people live out the commandments. What’s the first step toward that?

Knowing how to get there. Love God. Love your neighbor.

That’s how we get there.

As Amy Lindeman Allen writes at PoliticalTheology.com, “The greatness of the love commandment lies not in its surpassing value over and against all of the other commandments of Jewish law but, rather, in its ability to hold up all the rest. It’s less about beating out all of the other candidates and more about helping them to do their jobs.”

Love of God is the foundation for the commandments against worshiping other gods, against worshiping idols, against making false promises in God’s name. Love of neighbor is the foundation of keeping the sabbath, of honoring parents, of the prohibitions against murder, adultery, theft, lying, and coveting. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor;” wrote the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome, “therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Love sounds simple, but exercising it affects everything we do, everything we say, everything we plan, everything we set aside. Love enacted requires patience, effort, resilience, and resources. Love made manifest may call for commitment, hardship, even sacrifice.

Love looks like Ruth.

It's a funny thing. The word "love" appears only once in Ruth, toward the end of the story, which we'll read next week. As the book begins, Ruth did not claim to love her mother-in-law. She did not say anything, in fact, about her motives. She said, "I will not leave you," rather more poetically and emphatically than that. It must have been a hardship. As Debie Thomas writes at JourneyWithJesus.net, "I think it would be safe to say that Ruth's pledge of fidelity is not made to a companion who is, at this point in the story, easy or fun to be around. Naomi is bereft, depleted, forlorn, and bitter. It's possible that she's suffering a full-blown crisis of faith, imagining that the God she thought she knew has withdrawn his love, and cursed her with unspeakable suffering.

"Ruth's vow, then, is a vow of tenacity, fortitude, and sacrificial loyalty as much as it is a vow of affinity, affection, or 'love' as our culture might describe it. It is the vow of one grief-stricken, traumatized, and profoundly vulnerable woman to another."

Or to put it another way: she was not far from the realm of God.

With the love that God has for us, love displayed to us so thoroughly in Jesus, we are never far from the realm of God. But we are closest to living the reign of God when we love God and one another. When we, to borrow Paul's words to the Corinthians, show patience and kindness, when we act without envy, boastfulness, arrogance, or rudeness. When we restrain our irritability over not getting our own way, when we keep no record of wrongs, when we rejoice in the truth. When we bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things...

Then we are not far from the realm of God.

Not far at all.

Amen.

by Eric Anderson