

Nov 1 God of the Living Mark 12:26-27a; 28-34

According to a March Chicago Tribune story, anywhere from 40,000 to 200,000 patients woke up during their surgeries last year but were unable to move (because of muscle relaxants) or tell their doctors they needed more anaesthesia. Far fewer woke up during sermons.

We are working our way through the book of Mark. No frills in Mark. Some have suggested that since this gospel is so brief, it must contain the most important stories from the life of Jesus. Our passage today may be an exception.

Jesus is asked about the greatest commandment. He replies that the greatest commandment is two-fold: love God and love neighbor. In the gospel of Matthew, this is all that is reported. But in Mark, there is an additional conversation with a scribe.

In v. 32 the scribe responds to Jesus' question: you are right teacher, and then he restates what Jesus said. But then he adds, in the last part of v. 33, *this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices*. This part of the response impressed Jesus because scribes and Pharisees were often over-focused on the laws of worship and ritual. Mark says that Jesus thought he answered wisely.

But then Jesus says something you wouldn't expect. He says, *You are not far from the Kingdom of God*. Not far? He affirms Jesus' answer and goes one better with his wise insight and he's only close? After Jesus said that the scribe was not far from the Kingdom, Mark adds, *After that no one dared to ask him any question*. I think I know why.

Remember those days when the math teacher called you up front to work problems on the black board. Let me explain to those who don't know what a black board is. Back in the dark ages, every classroom had black or dark green boards hanging on the wall. Teachers used something called chalk to write on these boards. Hand devices made of dense and rough felt were used to erase the chalk from the board. These devices actually just spread the chalk out into a thin dust. Special children were chosen at the end of the day to clean the erasers by beating them together. I always beat them on the brick side of the school so I didn't inhale so much dust, but the Assistant Principle suggested that I not do that anymore. This is how I first learned about wind direction.

I remember asking a question in algebra class and the teacher's response was to call me up to work the problem on the board... in front of everyone. I was confident of how to begin, but was getting stuck in the middle, and that's what happened when I did it on the board. So I stopped midstream and said, *this is the part I'm not sure about*. *Well give it a try*, the teacher said. So I worked it out and when I was finished, the teacher said, "that's close, but incorrect." So he called on Sally whatshername to fix it. I could feel my face turn red as I walked back to my desk and I remember thinking, *I'll never ask another question in this class*.

Scribes were well-respected for their biblical knowledge. So when the expert seemed to get it right and yet the answer wasn't good enough for the Kingdom, it sent a shock wave through the crowd. They weren't about to ask Jesus anything.

Why was the scribe only near the kingdom given that he affirmed the word of Jesus and answered wisely? Could it be that knowing enough isn't really enough?

A SS teacher was wanting to use the analogy of a squirrel to make a point about seeking the kingdom, so she said to her 5th grade class: I'm thinking of an animal that lives in the trees, buries his food for winter and spring and has a long bushy tail. Do you know what animal I'm describing?

On bright girl in the room raised her hand and said, "Well I know the answer is either Jesus, the Bible or prayer, but it sounds like a squirrel to me."

What if the kingdom is not really made of people who have the right answers about their religion? What if knowledge, and the pride and confidence it brings, is actually a stumbling block to the kingdom? What if knowledge gets you only so far? And what is necessary to take you all the way into the kingdom?

Even more than first century Jews, Americans believe in the value of education. That's great as far as it goes, but what about virtue; what about character; what about integrity; what about trusting what you can't explain?

I'm confident that this is precisely what that scribe struggled with. Here is Jesus putting yet another seeker in the place of having to struggle with something in order to discover the truth. Rather than leaving the scribe patting himself on the back, Jesus left him with a disturbing thought; something that would likely keep him awake that night. I'm confident this man kept trying to figure out why his answer didn't earn the A he expected. And so he likely continued to search his soul for what was missing, which was exactly what the Teacher wanted.

All of us in this place have been taught that the right answers will take you anywhere. That's what parents want; what teachers want; and by extrapolation, what God wants. And so our Christianity is mostly about knowing the right stuff so that when we get to the Pearly Gates, we'll be able to pass the entrance exam. What if the right answers only get you close?

What if we said to Jesus that we knew he died for our sins and he replied, you are not far from the kingdom? What if we said we knew that God created the heavens and the earth and he said, close, but not there? What if we said that we knew salvation comes by faith and not by works and Jesus said, you answered wisely, and you're not far from the kingdom?

What else is Jesus looking for?

I get quizzed by potential members very often. They want to know, before they join, what they might hear from me in the pulpit. Some want to know my position on key matters of faith: salvation, Scripture, Jesus. I welcome that. Others, however, have odd litmus tests.

One fellow in Mississippi, right out of the shoot said, "**You do preach from the King James, don't you?**" For many years, I tried to explain that the King James was translated from newer and less accurate manuscripts and that older more accurate manuscripts had been found. Eventually, I figured out that that this was inconsequential information. After that, I just said "no, I use the NRSV" and that was usually the end of the conversation.

I've often had people ask me if I preach **tithing**. My standard response is *yes, but the Bible says so much more about giving than just tithing*. Most people who ask me this are tithers who want to know that I affirm their position. But one lady said to me that she was tired of hearing about tithing. She thought people should give what they want to give without any legalistic demands by the pastor.

I guess the most bizarre quiz I've been given over the years was from an elderly man who wanted to know if I preached that old people shouldn't have sex. I thought he was kidding me and I started to laugh, but he was dead serious. I struggled for an answer and I think I said something like *I don't recall any biblical text that deals with that*. He reminded me how old Abraham and Sarah were when Isaac came along and then mumbled something about his daughter giving him grief about a girlfriend at the retirement home. I guaranteed him that he wouldn't hear anything like that from me.

The underlying theme of these questions is usually "are you going to upset my religious apple cart?" Are you going to question any of my positions? Are you going to make me rethink what I've already decided? Yet this is precisely what we see from Jesus in all the gospels.

Now we conclude with a verse that helps us celebrate All Saints Day. In **v. 27**, Jesus speaks about God speaking to Moses from the burning bush. God identified himself as ***the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob***. Jesus uses this phrase to say that **God is god of the living not the dead**.

The phrase might seem obscure, but it is gloriously clear. When God spoke to Moses, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were dead and buried. Yet God claimed to be their God in the present not just in the past. God doesn't have a relationship with that which is dead and gone. Therefore, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were very much alive and still the children of God.

This is what we celebrate today. Not that God was the God of our dearly departed whose names we have listed, but that God IS the God of (read names of our departed saints)

These, our brothers and sisters in Christ, have passed through death into everlasting life. God is God of the living. God brings us into his kingdom not because we know that right answers, but because we belong to God by simple trust. It's not really knowledge that moves us into the kingdom. It's knowing Jesus as Lord and Savior, like these our living saints in glory.

And all God's people said together, Amen.