

Sermon: Not Far From the Kingdom

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

The Kingdom of God, life eternal, it is the utmost goal, the ultimate pursuit, the metaphorical holy grail. Some see the Kingdom of God as a return to Eden, a restoration of what was once broken, a return to that naive innocence where humanity, the created order and the creator God exist in a perfect harmony. Some see the Kingdom of God not as going backward but as forward, as a final fulfillment of God's plan for salvation and reconciliation, where the relationship between creatures and the creator becomes that of mutual love.

The age-old question for us, the people of faith, is not what the Kingdom of God will be. The age-old question is: what must I do to enter into the kingdom? What does the Lord require of us?

Judaism approaches this question with a fairly simple answer: the Law, or Torah in Hebrew. The answer maybe simple, but its commandments, not just the top ten, but all 613 of them in the five books of Moses, are complex. Torah encompasses moral laws, ethical instructions, and cultic ordinances.

The problem that I see with Torah, is the rigid understanding of 'break one law, you break them all'. If one misses the mark, if one deviates just a tiny bit, just an iota of sin is enough to mark a sinner—thus precluded and excluded from having a right relationship with God.

The solution to this problem, according to Prophet Jeremiah, is the establishment of a new covenant, as in 31:33-34, "*I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest*", says the Lord. The Law that is imprinted in our hearts, never to forget, never to ignore, no more excuses, and never to plead ignorance—I didn't know.

Another bigger problem that I see with the Torah, is the overt focus on the letters of the Law to the detriment of the Spirit of the Law. Prophet Ezekiel saw this clearly too. So speaking on behalf of the Lord God, Ezekiel prophesied in 36:26-27 that, "*A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and*

give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.”

A new Spirit, a new heart, and a new covenant. All these set the stage for the New Testament, to our Scriptural reading this morning, where Jesus neatly summarized the Torah, in letters and in spirit, into two simple commandments of love: *“love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength...and love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Mark 12:30-31)

Let us unpack these two commandments. The context where Jesus uttered these two came out of a challenge. Jesus had entered into Jerusalem triumphantly. He had cursed an unfruitful fig tree, cleansed the money-changing Temple. His authority was questioned relentlessly by the religious establishment of the day. Jesus was questioned about paying taxes to Cesar, questioned about the theology of resurrection.

Now one of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well. The scribe, which should really be understood as an expert in the Law, then tested Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all?”

Facing this latest challenge, Jesus answered with the Shema (that is to hear in Hebrew). It is a well known passage in Deuteronomy 6:4, a well known doctrine in Judaism. *“The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’”* It is a call to Israel to remember God’s goodness and faithfulness, in light of the Exodus experience. It is a call to remember that there is only one God, in light of the context of polytheism, from the land of Egypt to the land of Canaan.

With the Shema now firmly recalled, Jesus then pronounced not one but two commandments. First, love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The key here is ‘all’, not half hearted, nor quartered minded, not 1/8 of your soul, nor 1/16 of your strength. The key is ‘all’—to give is your best shot, with everything you got, and persist until the very end, no matter the cost.

Gaby Andersen-Schiess is a former Swiss long-distance runner who competed in the first women’s marathon at the 1984 Summer Olympic in L.A. It was a long anticipated and long overdue event. Gaby was 39 years old back then. She already had a distinguished career prior to that Olympic, and at that age, it would’ve been her final shot. Gaby did not win that title, as matter of fact, she came in 37 out of 44. However, she left a most memorable mark.

During that run at a distance of 26.2 miles, the temperature was hitting nearly 30 °C. At that time, the rules stipulated that there could only be five water stations, and contestants could not be given water anywhere else. Unfortunately for Gaby, she missed the fifth and last station and became severely dehydrated. As she was nearing the final track, inside the stadium, running on the heated surface, she staggered. Her torso was twisted, her left arm limp, and her right leg had mostly seized.

In that final 400 meters, it felt like almost an eternity for her to finish. The medical personnels approached Gaby, but she waved them off, knowing that if they touched her she would be disqualified. The crowd was cheering wildly, witnessing that final approach, as Gaby twisted and limped across that finish line. She gave it all, all of her heart, soul, mind and strength. That is the kind of love that Jesus would have us, would require of us.

The second commandment the Jesus went on to pronounced, is to love your neighbour as yourself. It actually comes out of Leviticus 19:18, in the section titled 'various Laws' covering all sorts of ethical responsibilities, almost the last part of that last section. It should really be noted that the elevation of loving your neighbour (and yes it is an elevation), is agreed upon by both Jesus and that expert in the Law.

For us, we almost take it for granted that loving one's neighbour as oneself is self-evident, self-explanatory. Try practice it where you live, not selectively but universally. You don't get to pick and choose. You don't get to say I love Otto—he's got a good family, good job, and he seems to be genuinely caring for others. I could like Mary—she is quiet and retired, though her driving is a bit wild for someone in her 80's. I don't know about Tom—it's kind of embarrassing that someone in his middle age still think he could party like it was 1999. Jesus would say: Love them all! Love them as you love yourself, and that is hard.

Coming back to that scribe, that expert in the Law. After hearing Jesus, and repeating what Jesus had just stated, he commended Jesus on his choice of the two: to love God and to love one's neighbour, as much more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices. Jesus, seeing him answered wisely, said to the scribe, "*You are not far from the kingdom of God.*" So the scribe walked away happy, patting himself on the back—not too far, not too far!

Yes, not too far, yet facing a deep and uncrossable chasm. Uncrossable, at least not by our own efforts. Jesus, at that time, had yet to face the cross, and in due time would. It would be in God ultimate design that the event of the cross—in Christ's death and resurrection—would pave the way for us, for all to cross that uncrossable chasm, thus becoming our bridge, our mediator, our saviour. Thanks be to God!

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.