Spirituality
Pencil Preaching





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“You are not far from the Kingdom of God” (Matthew 12: 34).

Hos 14:2-10; Matt 12:28-34

Today’s Gospel presents one of the most beautiful examples of the Jewishness of Jesus as he and a scribe perform dueling recitations of the *Sh’ma*, the most important prayer all Jews recite twice daily. Matthew, the most Jewish of the four evangelists, writing for a mostly Jewish Christian faith community in Antioch of Syria, indulges the joy of this exchange by preserving the full text of the prayer twice; first when Jesus says it and second when the scribe repeats it.

The moment occurs when a scribe asks Jesus what the first commandment of the Law is. In some versions of this story, hostile intent is hinted, that the scribe was testing Jesus to see if he was theologically grounded. The scribe, a professional lawyer, was immersed in the study of the Torah and could explain and apply every aspect of the Mosaic Law to any life situation. Jesus was only a hill country carpenter from suspect Galilee, the northern part of Israel, sometimes called “Galilee of the Gentiles” to emphasize its distance from Jerusalem and certified orthodoxy.

But Matthew’s version has little hostility and instead presents two brother Jews transported by the words of the prayer they both know by heart:

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 is this:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

The prayer, found in Deuteronomy 6 and Numbers 15, is part of Moses' instruction to the people as they are about to enter the Promised Land. It is the foundation, centering text and organizing principle of the Covenant that places God first in their lives. It contains the whole Law. It is the basis for "right relationship" and the moral code that governs the people's lives with God and one another. A Jew who obeyed this first commandment need not worry about offending God or straying from the intimate web of beliefs and practices that defined and protected Jewish identity.

The scene concludes as Jesus tells the exhilarated scribe that he is "not far from the Kingdom of God." To suggest that he was incomplete may seem an affront, but Jesus is telling him that he is still on the threshold of an even deeper relationship with God. To know and recite the Sh'ma was less than to live it, and living it was only the penultimate step to surrendering oneself to the intimacy Jesus was offering by virtue of his Incarnation, the gift of divine mutuality, true friendship between a human being and the divine Being that is God.

The stunning implications of what is being offered by Jesus and through Jesus may be the reason the text ends with the curious statement that "no one dared ask him any more questions." The scribe has experienced human solidarity with Jesus but also knows he has just experienced a theophany.

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