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"You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34).

Tobit 6:10 ff; Mark 12:28-34

A rabbi once noted that when most people pray, they talk to God, but when Jews pray, they first listen. The Sh'ma, their most important daily prayer, begins with the word, "Hear." "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is Lord alone." This establishes God as the absolute source of all reality. When we pray, we are first acknowledging that our very existence depends on God. We have not only been called into being by God, but our continuing existence, day by day, moment by moment, is sustained by God's care for us.

The Sh'ma then tells us how to live fully within this relationship. If we love God with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul and all our strength, we are responding in kind to God's initiating love for us. God's total love for us flows in a reciprocal and dynamic exchange that defines our existence. Within this exchange of love we are fully alive, created to respond to our Creator, living in right relationship with every other created thing, in sync and in tune with the divine Will.

The scribe who asked Jesus what was the first among all the commandments may have intended to test him to see if this hillbilly preacher from Galilee was for real. After all, he was just a carpenter with no formal theological training. But when Jesus recited the Sh'ma, it was not only the correct answer, but it was also music to this scribe's ears. His spirit began to hum as the wheels within wheels of his heart aligned perfectly. The words of this beloved prayer came to his own lips, and he repeats them in full.

Mark, whose Gospel is the shortest one and whose simple story telling style kept words at a minimum, captures the moment by letting this double recitation of the prayer stand. The scribe praises Jesus, and Jesus pays him the highest compliment possible: "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." What began as a possible confrontation ends in a love fest.

In the movie "Deliverance," a banjo duel between one of the men in the canoe party and a boy on the porch begins simply, a phrase at a time, and then erupts into a shared celebration of harmony between strangers. In Mark's account today, the learned scribe and the country preacher find full communion within a universe centered perfectly on the love of God. Jesus knew that the Kingdom was not a place but an openness of heart that connects us with God and with one another. In that moment, the scribe was on holy ground and only a step away from discipleship. He was left to ponder this call in the silence that followed as he rejoined his fellow scribes and tried to explain what had just happened.

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