Spirituality
Pencil Preaching



by Pat Marrin

View Author Profile
patrickjmarrin@gmail.com.

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

Hos 14:2-10; *Mk 12:28-34*

Some 20 years ago, our small midtown Catholic parish in Kansas City was being considered for closure because of falling attendance, lack of money and outreach. A group of determined parishioners met with the bishop to request and plot a path forward that began with a weeklong retreat.

Part of that retreat included a talk by a local rabbi who said that unlike many religions that go to God with requests, Jews begin by listening. He cited the simple prayer said by all Jews twice a day that begins with the word “Hear” (Sh’ma in Hebrew): “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.” This is the first and greatest commandment. The idea is that If we listen, it establishes us in right relationship with God, the source and goal of our existence.

During our retreat, we sometimes sat in silence, then opened the doors of the church to the sounds of the neighborhood -- traffic flowing by, people calling to one another, police, fire and ambulance sirens setting the pace and tone of the central city. As we listened, it was clear that our presence in this location had to be our response in ministry.

Though Mark is the briefest of the four Gospels, he pauses to luxuriate in repeating the entire prayer twice when a scribe asks Jesus what he sees as the Greatest Commandment. As Jesus responds and the scribe affirms his words, both of them exude joy in simply saying the words of the Sh’ma: 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. (Jesus then adds the second commandment that follows from the first: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.")

This text forms the foundation of the Covenant and contains all other commandments, all morality and spirituality. It is the one response to God that defines us as human beings in this world. As we rise to face each new day, even feeling totally inadequate and fragmented, this text has the power to call us into existence once again, grounded in the Source of our being. We are blessed with everything we need to live fully and with integrity. Whether we worship in a church, a synagogue, a mosque or just by our existence as people in this world, this prayer roots us in humanity and all our hopes for justice and harmony.

Mark might have summarized his entire Gospel in this prayer, recording that Jesus said these words, then lived them to the full. Everything else followed, including his death and resurrection. If we truly love God and neighbor, the whole world will be redeemed before us, with every word we speak and every step we take. Joy is the first act of faith, God’s word dwelling in our hearts. If we give ourselves to this love, the rest will follow.