

“The Next Step”

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
November 8, 2009*

Ruth 3:1-5, 4:13-17; Mark 12:28-34

Our first scripture passage comes from the Old Testament story of Ruth. To understand the part we will be reading, it is necessary to know that Ruth is the Moabite daughter-in-law of Naomi, who had migrated to Moab from the town of Bethlehem with her husband and sons during a famine. After Naomi's husband and then, ten years later, both of her sons, die in Moab, she decides to return to Bethlehem - and Ruth, newly widowed, pledges to leave her own homeland to accompany her mother-in-law back to Judah. “Your people will be my people, your God will be my God,” she says. We pick up the story with Naomi trying to “set Ruth up” with one of Naomi's cousins - in part to make sure that there is a man to take care of them, which was important in that male-dominated society. So listen to how that turns out, and how Ruth, a non-Israelite, becomes the great-grandmother of King David. *Read Ruth here.*

Our second scripture passage comes from the 12th chapter of Mark's Gospel, beginning with the 28th verse. To set the passage in context, it is Holy Week, and Jesus is in the Jerusalem Temple teaching. He has been answering hostile questions from the religious leaders, questions intended to entrap him. He has responded to queries about what the source of his authority is and whether or not it's lawful to pay taxes to the emperor. Some snarky Sadducees, who didn't even believe in the concept of resurrection, have posed him a hypothetical question about whose wife a woman will be in the resurrection if she was married to seven different brothers who all died in succession in this life. Now a scribe, a religious scholar, comes up to Jesus and poses his own question. Listen to their back and forth. And when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, realize that he is not talking about what an African-American colleague of mine calls pie in the sky, way up high, in the sweet by and by, after you die. He's talking about a state of being in which we and others live by God's priorities, as if God is directing us, as if love rules our decision making. *Read Mark here.*

He was *so close* to the Kingdom of God, that scribe. Not like the chief priests and elders who had earlier tried to trap Jesus with a question about who gave him his authority. Not like the Pharisees and Herodians who had attempted to trip Jesus up with a question about paying taxes to the emperor. Not like the Sadducees who had sought to mock Jesus with a question about a hypothetical marriage scenario involving a woman they didn't care about in a resurrection in which they didn't believe. All of those people were light years from the Kingdom of God, caught up as they were in their head-trips and power plays. Their questions had nothing at all to do with understanding the truth that Jesus came to proclaim.

But the scribe's question was genuine. When he saw how well Jesus answered the others I believe the scribe really and truly wanted to know which commandment Jesus thought was the greatest of all. He really wanted to know.

You might say that the scribe possessed a receptive spirit. He was receptive to hearing truth. And he knew truth when he heard it. So when Jesus said, “*Love 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,” the scribe was in the “Amen” corner. “Oh yes, Jesus. That’s right. Love God with all your heart, and all your understanding, and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. That’s more important than any ritual sacrifice. Preach it, brother, preach it.”

The scribe recognized truth when he heard it, and there was plenty of truth in what Jesus said. In fact, there is no finer, more succinct summary of what it means to live a life pleasing to God than those words. It is said that another Jewish rabbi who lived at roughly the same time as Jesus, a man named Hillel, once boasted that he could recite the entire Torah, the entire law of God, while standing on one foot. When people called Hillel’s hand, he picked up one leg and said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself. This is the whole law and the whole prophets. The rest is just commentary.” Then he put his leg down.

There’s plenty of truth in that. And there are all kinds of ways to unpack what that truth can mean for our lives. For instance, we could reflect together, you and I, on what it means to love your neighbor as you love yourself. I’ve heard more than one sermon on the connection between loving yourself and loving your neighbor, sermons that make the good and important point that we love our neighbors only as well as we love ourselves. If we are harshly critical of ourselves, we are likely to be harshly critical of others. If we have never internalized God’s grace in our own lives, we are not likely to be truly gracious and loving to others. Related to that, one of the best posters I’ve ever seen depicts a child in an inner city ghetto. The caption says, “God made me and God don’t make no junk.” If we feel like junk, we’ll treat others like junk. But the more we come to know and feel God’s love for us, warts and all, the more we’re able to sense that we are precious in God’s sight, the more we’re able to express love to others. Love God, and love of self and love of neighbor naturally follow. There’s plenty of truth in that.

Then again, we could reflect together on exactly who fits in the category of the neighbor we’re supposed to love as we love ourselves. At that point, I might tell the story of Ruth, the foreigner who showed devotion to her mother-in-law Naomi, and to Naomi’s God, even after her husband’s death. Even after there was no reason for her to stay connected to Naomi, Ruth stuck by her and followed her God. Despite the fact that she was a foreigner... And in the end, Ruth became the great-grandmother of King David.

Then we could talk about how the prophet Jonah was sent to Nineveh, because God cared enough about the hated Assyrians, who had caused such pain to the Israelites, to want them to turn from their destructive ways. Next we might consider Luke’s version of today’s Gospel lesson, which features not a scribe but a lawyer, who asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Remember that story? When Jesus responds by saying love God with all of your being and love your neighbor as yourself, the lawyer says, “And who is my neighbor?” That’s when Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan, the half-breed who shows compassion to the unclean man in the ditch, unlike the good religious folk who pass by on the other side. There is truth in that approach, too. Challenging truth... Truth we need to hear in the aftermath of the shootings at Fort Hood. We need to work even harder at learning to live together, Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists and everyone else.

Another way to unpack the meaning of today's passage would be to reflect together on what it means to really love someone, at which point I would share what I think is one of the best definitions of love around. I don't know who said it first, but to truly love someone is to want what is best for him or her. If I love you, I want what is best for you. I won't abuse you. I won't intentionally try to hurt, wound, or destroy you. Now I might challenge you to help you grow to a new and better way of living. Because if I love you, I want you to experience life abundant: a life lived fully, a life felt deeply, a life that leads you outside of yourself, which is the only place true joy can be found. It is a loving thing to challenge someone to grow spiritually, to grow in their ability to express gratitude and generosity.

Which brings us back to our scribe, nodding his head at Jesus' words. He knows what he's hearing is true. That's why Jesus says to him, "*You are not far from the Kingdom of God, old man.*" The scribe is so close. But the question is: will he act on the truth that he knows? Will he take the next step and really and truly put his whole self into loving God and neighbor? Or will he hold back?

By now you know, or I hope you know, that next Sunday is our Stewardship Dedication Sunday here at Immanuel. One of the best ways I know to describe stewardship is that it is about responsibly managing all of the gifts God has given us (our whole lives, our time and our talents, and yes, our money) and in gratitude dedicating a meaningful portion of those gifts back to God and God's work in the world. To be a good steward is not just to be grateful for how God is with us here at Immanuel through our worship, education, service, fellowship, and care - and beyond these walls in the wonder and worry, the needs and opportunities of the larger world. To be a good steward is not just to grasp the truth that the greatest commandment is to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength and our neighbors as ourselves. To be a good steward is to take the next step and actually put our time, talent, and yes, our money where our mouth is.

There are a variety of ways to do that, of course, and here in this place and from this pulpit we regularly celebrate how people give of their time and talents, *from*

- Saturday mornings spent working with young people in Anacostia, to hours given working with older adults at Chesterbrook, *from*
- prayer shawls knitted to brownies baked for Children of Mine, *from*
- nails hammered for Habitat for Humanity to cards written and visits made to those in need of comfort, *from*
- windows washed and piles of mulch moved at the church workday to coffee made for fellowship time.
- Leading worship, being an acolyte, serving on a committee, singing in the choir or playing bells, studying in a small group, making a meal.

These are all part of the stewardship of time and talent - and you hear about opportunities to participate in them all the time. And stewardship is about how we manage all of life, so that being a good parent, being

a good spouse, being the best we can in the workplace, voting and otherwise participating in the political process - *this is all part of good stewardship.*

But in this season of the year, we focus on the stewardship of our finances. We do that, not because the stewardship of our time and talent is unimportant - *it is very important.* We focus on financial stewardship not because we expect that everyone has the same means and can give at the same level and not because we believe a person can buy his or her way into heaven. We focus on financial stewardship because it is part of taking the next step for ALL of us, whatever age we happen to be. Financial stewardship is a spiritual discipline. The expression of gratitude and generosity always draws us close to God, because it moves us beyond knowing the truth to actually doing it, and in so doing it is good for the soul.

I loved what John Jackson said last week at the 11:15 service. Encouraging people to give of their finances to bless others is kind of like telling a child to eat their vegetables. They may not like it, but it is good for them. It is good for them, and it is good for us because it helps us keep money in proper perspective, it helps us learn to trust God, and it allows us to participate in God's work in the world. Of course, it's not just the money we give to the church that can accomplish this - money given to other charitable causes can be part of our stewardship. But we shouldn't neglect giving generously to God's work here.

One summer day six years ago, my wife Judith and I and our two daughters spent several hours at a water park. We were with my nephews, who were little daredevils. This particular water park has some kiddie slides, and some other slides you slide down on mats, and three super-fast tube slides that you have to climb to a top of a tall platform to go down. The tube slides are the scariest and the most fun. When the lifeguard says go, you climb in them and you hurtle down with a great rush of adrenaline until you hit the water at the bottom. It's almost like you're flying through the air.

As our time at the water park progressed, my nephews soon got bored with the other slides and started going down the tube slides. It didn't take long for Martha to decide she was going to go down them, too. I say it didn't take long. Actually, it did. She pretty quickly climbed to the top of the platform and stood in line. But when her turn came to go down, she hesitated. She was *so close*. The lifeguard and her cousins and the other kids and adults up on the platform were encouraging her to go, but she'd get set, only to pull out at the last minute. Judith and I and her Aunt Susan watched from the bottom as Martha would do this three or four times, then she'd move back to the back of the line, trying to muster up her courage. Before long, she'd be back at the head of the line, all poised and ready. But when Martha got the go ahead, she'd pull out again. Back to the end of the line she went. It was high drama and frankly, a little frustrating. Her mom and her Aunt Susan and I were all down at the bottom cheering for her to go, but that didn't seem to make a difference.

Finally, I went up there. I pulled Martha aside and told her, "Listen. You don't have to do this. But if you decide not to, just think of all that you'll be missing. All these people are here cheering you on. This is your chance to show them that you can do it. And besides that, it's going to be super fun. But you have to let go."

As I think about that distant summer day, and Jesus' conversation with the scribe, I wonder if the kingdom of God is not unlike a tube slide. We might begin to think that the Kingdom of God is synonymous with "the sweet by and by," as if it's just some place we go after we die. But that's not the way Jesus used the term. For Jesus, the Kingdom was something people could be a part of in the here and now, not just in the sweet by and by. For Jesus, the Kingdom was realized whenever people lived out God's truth by loving God fully and loving neighbor as they loved themselves. So he prayed, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven."

Whenever we participate in loving God with our whole being and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves, God's will is done and God's kingdom comes. But to do that, we have to put our whole selves in and we have to let go. We can't fully experience the joy of the Kingdom if we never let go of resentments, or of desire for revenge, or of grasping, or of the need for control. We can cling to both sides of the slide all we want, we cling to our desire for security all we want, but that's our loss. I can envision Jesus telling the scribe (and you and me), "If you decide not to do this, if you decide to just think about it and never let go, just think what you'll be missing."

Jesus' conversation with the scribe reminds me that there is a big difference between knowing in your head something is true and integrating it into the rest of your life.

The question that Jesus, my daughter Martha, and the scribe all raise for me - and maybe for you - is this:

Where in our lives do you and I need to move to put our whole selves in and let go?

Where are you and I, almost, but not quite, "this far" from the kingdom?

- † Perhaps it's moving from affirming the truth with my mind that God is a God of abundance who loves me and calls me to give generously and sacrificially, to *actually giving* generously and sacrificially and trusting God with the results.
- † Perhaps it's moving from stating the truth that God is a God who forgives people out there to *actually embracing and internalizing God's forgiveness* in your own life and then expressing forgiveness to others.
- † Maybe it's moving from knowing the truth that God loves everyone, no exceptions, to *actually living that out* in the way we treat the checker in the grocery store, the poor person we see on the street, the Muslim we encounter this week, or the member of our family who really annoys us.

Whatever it is, it takes putting myself in there fully, to fully experience the benefits of the kingdom.

I guess you're wondering if Martha ever really went down that slide. The answer is, she did. And once she did, she had so much fun; she wanted to do it again and again and again. I was asking her about

that this week. And she said to me, “Do you know what’s interesting, Dad? Every year we go back to those slides, I have to learn to trust again.”

In Jesus’ name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

Filename: Sermon Nov 8 2009 AFE FINAL
Directory: U:\TDaniels\Web Site\Sermons 2009\Sermons Oct to Dec 2009
Template: C:\Documents and Settings\tdaniels.IPCMCLEAN\Application Data\Microsoft\Templates\Normal.dot
Title: "The Next Step"
Subject:
Author: Aaron Fulp-Eickstadt
Keywords:
Comments:
Creation Date: 11/16/2009 10:48 AM
Change Number: 2
Last Saved On: 11/16/2009 10:48 AM
Last Saved By: Tracey Daniels
Total Editing Time: 0 Minutes
Last Printed On: 11/16/2009 10:48 AM
As of Last Complete Printing
Number of Pages: 6
Number of Words: 2,512 (approx.)
Number of Characters: 14,323 (approx.)