Praxis Makes Faithful
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Mark 12:28-37
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 3, 2015

Scripture Introduction
The sermon title started out as “Praxis Makes Perfect”—clever, but “perfect” is misleading. Praxis is the process of getting our words and actions lined up, as Paul longs for in today’s opening sentences, by criticizing and correcting both our actions and words. We learn something in our imperfect actions and then correct the words and adjust our actions in response. And that process does, by grace, lead to greater faithfulness. So, I prefer the word “faithful.” It calls to mind Wendell Berry's gracious description of his flawed and faithful congregation in Port William.

It was a community always disappointing itself, disappointing its members, always trying to contain its divisions and gentle its meanness, always failing and yet always preserving a kind of will toward good will...

That “preserving” is a matter of grace and praxis.

We’ve been reading our way through Mark 12 and Jesus’ controversies with various authorities in Jerusalem. Today we meet a scribe.

Scripture: Mark 12:28-37

28 One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” 29 Jesus answered, “The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 30 you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' 31 The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.” 32 Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; 33 and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,'—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” 34 When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

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I read the news today. Oh, boy.

A week or so ago, toward the end of our worship committee meeting, we talked about the guns, the poverty, the complex violence, the racism, and the media’s spinning of events and its feeding polarization and peddling fear. Everyone had had a long day already. So when we started, the floodgates opened. We shared frustration and anger.

That night by the end of our meeting, a word of hope emerged, and I will offer that word again today. But on the way there, I want go through this text from Mark. It will be helpful.

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Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.
This story continues the series of controversies that we began last week. Today we encounter a scribe. He's been overhearing these disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees and Sadducees and Herodians. The scribe enters the conversation with his own question. He asks, not an innocent question, but almost a rhetorical question. The scribe knows the answer he wants. He's even geared up to provide it himself.

The encounter is something like the college sophomore in physics asking Einstein, “So which is the first law of thermodynamics?”

The scribe asks, “Which commandment is first of all?” He seems to ask theoretically. We’re not sure what, if anything, is at stake for the scribe. He doesn’t indicate why he’s asking. He’s seen Jesus “answer well,” and he has his own question. He’s testing or maybe trying to impress him.

And Jesus answers, but in answering, Jesus raises the stakes; he says, “The first is….” Now, he could have said, “…that command about loving God,” but he chooses to say it this way, “Hear, O Israel. The Lord your God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength….” It’s as if Jesus looks the scribe squarely in the eyes and commands him. It’s direct address, command. It’s not theoretical.

And he goes on, “…and the second is this,” raising the stakes further, suggesting that you can’t say one of these without the other. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” I assume Jesus doesn’t take his eyes off the scribe when he cites the second; again, it’s direct address.

And, bingo! It’s the answer the scribe expected. Because he’s primed, perched, ready to add his own erudite commentary on the answer, he may have missed Jesus’ direct address, but he says, “Good answer, Dr. Einstein! God is one and there is none other. And....”

Now, we need to listen extra carefully. At the beginning of this story, Mark cues us to read carefully by telling us this is about a scribe. Scribes spent their lives reading, copying, reading, and re-copying Scripture—one careful letter at a time. That was their work. They knew the minutiae of the text intimately. Theirs was detail work. Missing a little—a jot or a tittle—was a failure.

You know when a small mistake looms large: The best church bulletin typo I ever experienced involved one measly letter that spellcheck would not find. One Sunday back in California (where we have real earthquakes, not the little 4.2 ones that Michigan had on May 2; this was just Mother Nature clearing her throat.), in the unison prayer, we all intoned it together and came to the very last word of the prayer, where an “h” stood in place of an “e” and well over half the congregation didn’t notice and finished their prayer, “And, Lord, grant us peach.”

The miss can be as small as knowing what to do but not doing it.

To scribes, tiny discrepancies were like fingernails on a chalk board. One small failure could mean the difference between grace and grease, between hope and hype. They really did know Scripture in detail. So by telling us that this is man is a scribe, Mark tells us that every word of this conversation matters. The particular words are critical to our grasping its meaning.

The scribe continues his erudite comment on Jesus’ answer. Almost before the words are out of Jesus’ mouth, the scribe says, “Good answer! God is one and there is none other! And to love God with the
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whole heart and the whole intellect and whole strength and to love the neighbor as oneself is better than whole burnt offerings."

Now, the details: First, the scribe really does know Scripture. The one place in the Old Testament where love of God and love of neighbor are set together is in Hosea, which the scribe quotes in his “better than whole burnt offerings” phrase. He is intelligent, very clever.

Second, there is a slight but disturbing shift in vocabulary between Jesus’ citation and the scribe’s. Jesus says, “Love God with your mind,” using the Greek word διάνοια, a word best translated as “thinking it through.” The scribe uses the word σύνεσις translated here as “understanding.” But σύνεσις also means “cleverness, shrewdness.” Now, διάνοια and σύνεσις are not far from one another but not quite the same. And when Jesus says the scribe answers wisely, a better translation would be “sensibly” or “discreetly.” It’s ambiguous at best.

Third, did you note the change in what grammarians call mood? Jesus uses direct address and command, “Hear, O Israel..., You shall love...”—direct address. The scribe, in his use of infinitives, seems to be musing, “Ah, yes, to love God and to love neighbor, these are better than sliced bread.” His tone is detached, academic in the weak sense of that word.

In a story about a scribe, about details, Mark has telegraphed already that something is amiss. Yes, the scribe has cited the right “reference verse,” but he’s changed the vocabulary and shifted the tone. He’s just a little... off. He’s not far... from being right, which only means...

But finally, and most importantly, Jesus’ full quote is, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” That word “soul” is the word ψυχή, and it is a critical word. It’s often translated “life.” Love the Lord with all your life; the key use of this word is in Mark 8.

For those who want to save their life (ψυχή) will lose it, and those who lose their life (ψυχή) for my sake... will save it.2

Now when the scribe responds to Jesus, this is his quotation, “to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength...” Something’s missing. Heart, smarts, strength.... He leaves out one small thing: his life. It’s just a detail, so he’s not far from being right, which only means he’s wrong. When Jesus says, “You are not far from the kingdom of God,” a miss is as good as a mile. And the scribe knew full well what Jesus meant when he said, “You’re not far....” And Mark concludes the story by saying, “No one dared to ask [Jesus] any question.”

This scribe is really smart. But the thing about the gospel is, it’s not about being smart; it’s about being good. It’s not about having all the right answers; it’s about being faithful.

Fred Craddock tells this story:

2 Mark 8:35–37.
“I think I was twenty years old when I read Albert Schweitzer’s Quest for the Historical Jesus. I found his Christology lacking…. I marked it up, wrote in the margins, raised questions of all kinds. And one day I read … that Albert Schweitzer was going to be in Cleveland, Ohio, to play the dedicatory concert for a big organ in a big church up there. According to the article he would remain afterward in the fellowship hall for conversation and refreshment.

“I bought a … bus ticket and went to Cleveland. All the way up I worked on this Quest for the Historical Jesus. I laid out my questions … I made references to the pages. “You said….” I figured, if there was a conversation in the fellowship hall, there’d be room for a question or two.

“I went there; I heard the concert; I rushed into the fellowship hall, got a seat in the front row, and waited with my lap of questions. After a while he came in, shaggy hair, big white mustache, stooped, and seventy-five years old. He had played a marvelous concert. You know he was a master organist, a medical doctor, philosopher, Biblical scholar, lecturer, writer, everything. He came in with a cup of tea and some refreshments and stood in front of the group, and there I was, close.

“Dr. Schweitzer thanked everybody: ‘You’ve been very warm, hospitable to me. I thank you for it, and I wish I could stay longer among you, but I must go back to Africa. I must go back to Africa because my people are poor and diseased and hungry and dying, and I have to go. We have a medical station at Lambaréné. If there’s anyone here in this room who has the love of Jesus, would you be prompted by that love to go with me and help me?’

Craddock said, “I looked down at my questions; they were so absolutely stupid. And I learned, again, what it means to be Christian and had hopes that I could be that someday.”

Craddock was not far from being right, not far..., which only meant....

Just the other day, a friend told me a story on herself.

Some twenty years ago, she and a friend had been talking about their children—were they learning their ABC’s yet?—that kind of thing. She was with this friend at a McDonald’s. While they were waiting in line, two youngish African-American women came in, one with a baby boy on her hip. My friend’s friend turned to look and said aloud, “Now, that’s one child that won’t grow to learn his ABC’s.”

Now that is a horrible, racist, ignorant thing to say. My friend said, “I knew that was wrong. It was so horrible. I think I apologized to the black woman who was taking our order at the time, but I did not say a word to my friend.”

My friend told me quite clearly that she knew the right answer. My friend is smart. But it’s not about having the right answers; it’s not about being smart. We can be that close, not far from faithful....

I’ve shared these insights about this text with the Moveable Feast before. And I was brilliant. This is a lot of my own scholarly work. I was proud of it. You know when I shared it? It was right after my now-dear

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friend Tom Are—whom I didn’t know well at the time... it was right after Tom presented his paper on this text, that... well, that missed these little insights of mine. I roared in like a rapier-witted academic and ripped his paper in front of Tom Long. I was this close, not far at all, but I’d misplaced my will toward good will and wasn’t even heading toward the kingdom. It’s not about being right. It’s about being good.

If you read the news or listen to it or watch it, it’s easy to think that the world is worse, that there is more evil, more hatred, more injustice, more violence than ever before. Maybe. I’m not sure. I will offer two contrary witnesses to that assessment. One is a scholarly work by neuroscientist Steven Pinker, who argues that we are in the least violent time in the history of our planet. It is an interesting and well-researched theory. It’s that we are more connected now, and the news thrives as a business on sensationalism and fear, and thus we are more aware of violence, but it is, he says, not worse than it was. And more personally, I have a friend who works in criminal forensics; he’s been investigating crime scenes for over twenty years. I asked him, “Do you see today that people are more violent, more evil than you used to see?” He then described to me the very first crime scene that he investigated two decades ago.

It has not gotten worse—not worse than that. It was a very evil crime he described. I suspect that there is as much evil, hatred, injustice, and violence as ever. There have always been horrors. We ourselves remember betrayal and crucifixion, heinous violence, when we gather for Communion. That likely hasn’t changed. But even if my friend is wrong, even if Steven Pinker is wrong, one thing surely has not changed.

We are not called to anything more heroic or faithful than were our forebears. We are called to do today what we have always been called to do. That’s something I learned from my friend Tom. Hear, O Israel. The Lord your God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. It is, as it always has been, how we are called to meet this broken world. It is what we have always been called to do.

That’s why we end the service the way we do: with our simply reminding ourselves of what we already know. We simply learn again what it means to be Christian. You do know what to do.

And as always, as with Fred, and Albert, and the scribe, and my friend at McDonald’s, and me, knowing what to do isn’t the whole gospel. It’s not about having the answers. It’s not about being smart; it’s about being faithful. It’s about what we know showing up in our lives.

Invitation to the Table
We do what we have always done, and one of those things is to gather here, to gather at this table and remind ourselves what it means to be Christian:

That absolutely everyone is welcome. Christ invites us to this table, not me, not the Presbyterians, not the Christians, but Christ. We gather here to remember that no one is to be left out, that justice matters always, and that we are expected to participate in the transformation of this world by witnessing to and practicing the love of God and neighbor.

And, by grace, our faith shows up in the way we live. Come, for everything is ready.