

## **“The Good Scribe?”**

4 November 2018: 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/All Saints Sunday

Salado UMC—Salado, Texas

Preaching Text: Mark 12:28-34

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**“Colleges hate geniuses, just as convents hate saints”— (Ralph Waldo Emerson).**

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“God creates out of nothing. Wonderful you say. Yes, to be sure, but God does what is still more wonderful: God makes saints out of sinners” (Soren Kierkegaard, *The Journals of Kierkegaard*). The church has two chief understandings about saints. Usually, when we celebrate All Saints Day, we remember departed believers who handed to us our Christian faith. This notion of saints suggests persons who “now rest from their labors” (Rev. 14:13). Saints, Paul writes, “fought the good fight” (2 Timothy 4:7).

In addition, a “saint” is anyone who belongs to the Body of Christ. These were and are preeminent stewards of God’s gifts which God endowed believers. A saint is, biblically speaking, not merely a person placed in stained glass windows upon death, but also believers who roll up their sleeves today. They work for justice and equity now. As the church observes All Saints Day, we remember those who have passed from our human scene. Yet, as we remember these believers who lived formerly among us, they inspire us as God’s saints even today. Hear the day’s lesson:

**One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he 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 (Mark 12:28-34).**

My old friend Buzz Stevens, told me this memorable and amusing story:

**A duke and duchess owned a large country estate with many servants who maintained it in their absence. One day the duchess decided to bring the servant staff together to get an accounting of how well they had performed their duties. She called them into a room one-by-one and asked them how things were going. In the midst of a lengthy interview the duchess said to one of the older servants, “Let me see, you have been with us twenty years?”**

**“Yes ma’am.”**

**“Your job is to walk the dog?”**

**“Yes ma’am.”**

**“But the dog has been dead for eighteen years?” [A long pause . . . .]**

**“Is there anything else you would like me to do, ma’am?”**

If this is where we are with God, then we know what kind of a servant we are, don't we? Perhaps, it is time to re-evaluate where we are regarding our talents. How do we deal with the talents God has entrusted to us? Good stewards are thoughtful disciples—those stewards who evaluate and deploy God's gifts in ways that build up God's Realm. Today's text highlights a scribe with whom Jesus resonates. For this reason, this scribe is worthy of our attention.

Typically, when a scribe appears in the Gospels, it signals a clash between Jesus and the religious establishment. Up to this point in Mark, readers find occasions underlining scribes' often negative status. For example, Mark writes that scribes do not have authority (Mark 1:22), that they question Jesus "in their hearts" (Mark 2:6), that they ask questions that throw negative light on Jesus' ministry (Mark 2:16, 3:22, 7:5), and that scribes reject Jesus with the elders/chief priests (Mark 8:31). Scribes were religious authorities who often argued with Jesus (Mark 9:14). Because of Jesus' spellbinding effect on crowds, the scribes looked for a way to discount Jesus (Mark 11:18).

So, when Jesus tells a scribe, "You are not far from the kingdom of God," this not only ought to make us curious. It also offers us an occasion for reflection. Jesus' offering praise to one of the religious authorities is worth documenting—which Mark has done. The astute Bible reader promptly detects that Jesus resonates with this unnamed scribe. Mark writes, "Jesus saw that he answered wisely." The scribe's wise answer prompts Jesus' response that this scribe is not far from God's Kingdom.

The scribe responds to Jesus' claim, which boils down the Jewish law to these essentials: love God and love neighbor. The scribe states Jesus' teaching, "is much more important than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Which is to say: "Although ritual may be essential, what is most indispensable is loving both God and neighbor." Perhaps we could say loving neighbor is loving God—and vice-versa.

In the province of stewardship, we church folk at times put too much emphasis on pledge cards once a year. Jesus' encounter with the "good scribe" reminds us of a vital truth of proper relationship to God. Maybe our pledge cards, our equivalent to "burnt offerings and sacrifices" can too habitually become substitutes for something deeper and more consequential than our outward devotion. Loving God and neighbor in heartfelt ways continually motivates us. As, Jay Darnell, my old preacher mentor, and fine saint of the church repeated often: **"People can give without loving, but no one can love without giving."**

We suffer the same temptations that first century people did. We like control. We want to rule our lives and even our relationship with God. But when we see Jesus and a scribe in agreement, then we fittingly pay rapt attention. Possibly the scribe and Jesus agree with Isaiah's question: "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord." Isaiah provides a steward's answer: "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isaiah 1:1, 16-17). That is what dependable disciples do.

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