

One of the gifts we receive in using the Narrative Lectionary is that we get to read even familiar Bible stories in a new way. Today's gospel reading has two stories many of us know well, Jesus being asked "which is the greatest commandment?" and the story sometimes called "the widow's mite," but we think of them as separate, even unrelated, stories. Reading them side by side, as Mark wrote them, helps give each story new and deeper meaning.

Last Sunday, we heard how Jesus and his disciples entered into Jerusalem in the week before Jesus would be crucified, and they made their way to the temple. Jesus has been teaching in parables, and a variety of religious leaders (scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees) have been arguing with him and trying to trick him into saying something – anything – they can use against him. In the midst of this tense atmosphere, a scribe, who has noticed that Jesus has answered all these questions well, asks Jesus another question, not to trick or trap him, but a common question discussed and debated by rabbis throughout the centuries: "Which commandment is the first of all?"

For Jews, there are 613 commandments in Scripture -- can you imagine? we Christians have a hard enough time keeping track of the "Top Ten" list with which we're familiar! – and so it was often asked, "which commandment is most important?" or "which commandment must always be obeyed, regardless of the circumstances?" or "which commandment comes first, and gives the others their meaning and proper priority?"

Jesus' answer is one that many before him and since him have given: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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." And he adds a second one, inextricably linked with the first, that together make up the greatest, or first, or most primary command: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The scribe agrees with Jesus, and repeats what he has said. Well, he almost but not quite, repeats Jesus' answer: there's a small but important difference in what Jesus says and what the scribe repeats.

Jesus says the first commandment is this: "The Lord *our* God, the Lord is one" and "*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" and "*you* shall love *your* neighbor as *yourself*." These commandments aren't about behavior – the "thou shalt nots" we might expect. This first commandment, Jesus says, is first of all about relationship. God has established relationship with *you* personally and with *us* communally, and so likewise the life of faith is built around our relationships with God and with our neighbor – all the rest of the commandments are about our attitudes and behavior in response to God establishing relationship.

But scribe in agreeing with Jesus says, yes, "*the* Lord is one" and "to love him with all *the* heart, and all *the* understanding, and all *the* strength" and "to love *one's* neighbor as *oneself*" are all important. It's as if for the scribe, these are just good ideas, or interesting discussion points – he misses that they have to do with *him*. He misses that to be a person of faith is about ideas and also relationship, attitudes as well as behavior. He misses that faith is an active way of living daily life.

Jesus' last words to this scribe both encourage and challenge the scribe – and us. "You're not far from the kingdom of God," he says. The scribe has the information about faithful living but seems not yet to have connected the dots between that information and his own life of faith, a life built on relationship with God and neighbor.

While still in the temple, probably still surrounded by most of the same crowd that has just witnessed his exchange with the scribe, Jesus observes people putting their monetary gifts into the temple treasury. He notices two things as he observes (though one small but important word is left out of our English translation) – Jesus notices not only *what* people put in the treasury but also *how* they put it in. He sees many rich people putting in large sums. Did they put them in joyfully? resentfully? humbly? with a lot of fanfare? Mark doesn't tell us that, but we are told that they contribute what they had spare, what they wouldn't notice missing.

And in contrast to that, Jesus draws his disciples' attention to a widow who has put in precisely what she doesn't have to spare: two small, worthless coins that are "all she had to live on" – literally, Jesus says "she put in her whole life." She doesn't have that to spare! And Jesus says she has given more than everyone else.

"She has put in everything she had, her whole life." With those words, Jesus both praises the faithfulness of this widow and critiques the circumstances that created her poverty. The community of faith is supposed to be providing for widows and other vulnerable members of the community. But the community has clearly let her down. In fact, Jesus has just warned the crowds about religious people whose behavior isn't living up to the responsibility to care for their neighbors. Some of these leaders have likely been leading long prayers asking God to provide support and care for widows, while at the same time pocketing the money that has been given for the support and care of widows and using it for their own purposes. The community has in some significant way failed this woman. But there she is, with everybody else, giving her gift out of love for God and her neighbor. This widow doesn't just generally agree with the idea that God is important in her life or that giving is a good thing for people to do – she also lives it, even in these challenging circumstances.

She gives her whole life. These are Jesus' last words in the temple to his disciples, and these words both encourage and challenge them and us. Jesus walks out of the temple, knowing that any moment now soldiers will be coming for him. He will be betrayed, arrested, put on trial, and crucified. He will give his whole life. Perhaps witnessing the widow's all-in faithfulness mattered not only for the disciples but also for Jesus himself in that moment.

The love of God and neighbor that Jesus identifies as the greatest commandment is this kind of all-in faithful living demonstrated by the widow. We don't always get it right, of course. But having been claimed by God for relationship and called by God to reciprocate that love in how we live, we can trust that God will provide all that we need to live faithfully. In Christ we are freed for all-in faithful living, loving God and our neighbor with all that we are and all that we have. Thanks be to God!