
How Far? Not Far! Not Far from the Kingdom of God

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Proper 26 – Year B**

Church friends, if you knew my mother you would know one of her favorite pastimes at this time of year. And I suspect she would not be alone in this congregation. Many of us, in the week before Halloween, enjoy watching the annual television broadcast: *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*. Before we celebrate here at church the holy days of All Saints and All Souls, we may observe the evening before All Saints—All Hallow's Eve—not by wearing costumes, or by going trick-or-treating anymore, but by watching Charles Schultz's children's characters from his Peanuts cartoon; watching how they observe Halloween every year.

And every year it's the same drama. Every year, while the other *Peanuts* characters go trick-or-treating on the holiday, Linus spends his time in a nearby pumpkin patch hoping for the Great Pumpkin to arrive; to arrive with presents for children who wait and watch for him. And every year Linus spends the days before Halloween trying to make his childhood friends believe with him. 'Don't go trick-or-treating,' he warns them, or 'you'll miss the appearance of the Great Pumpkin!'

Now if you haven't seen the show or don't already know the outcome, I have to spoil the ending for you in order to reflect on its meaning for us here today. That meaning is especially poignant when Linus occasionally succeeds in getting one of his friends to join him. But they are both disappointed. No Great Pumpkin appears with presents, and of course they've both missed any goodies they would have gotten from going trick-or-treating. Indeed, in a 1962 comic strip Linus's friend Sally, who also watched and waited in vain all night, exclaims to him, "[You owe me restitution!](#)"

Now the moral virtue of 'never giving up' is celebrated by many commentators as the key meaning of the story of Linus and the Great Pumpkin. Others highlight the virtue of sincerity because Linus often uses the phrase "sincere pumpkin patch." As one observer notes:

According to Linus, on Halloween night, the Great Pumpkin rises out of the pumpkin patch that he deems most "sincere." . . . Linus believes that the Great Pumpkin is very sensitive and easily offended and will bypass anyone who denies or doubts his existence, which is why a person should never say "*If* the Great Pumpkin comes," but always "*When* the Great Pumpkin comes" . . . [thus] trying to convince [the Great Pumpkin] that one's pumpkin patch is sincere . . . [that is, sincere vs. "[hypocritical](#)"].

Now this virtue of sincerity is also highlighted for me in today's gospel, when Jesus responds to a scribe asking him the key question, "Which commandment is the first of all?" (Mark 12:28). As we heard in the gospel reading, Jesus responds by combining two commandments that Anglicans have traditionally called "The Summary of the Law" (*Book of Common Prayer*, Holy Eucharist I, p. 324).

"'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.'
The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (vss. 30-31).

When the scribe hears this summary he responds affirmatively and acknowledges to Jesus,

"You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that . . . '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.

When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (vss. 32-34).

Not far from the kingdom of God! "You are not far from the kingdom of God." That's a tribute to sincerity and authenticity that Jesus bestows on persons who talk about such matters wisely.

Now by contrast with that scribe, a similar question about these two commandments is posed by Jesus himself to an obviously *insincere* character. In the gospel of Luke, immediately before Jesus tells the parable of The Good Samaritan, we read:

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" [Jesus] said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Luke 10:25-29

And that *insincere* question is the immediate occasion for Jesus telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. Thus he turns the questioner's ill-will to good effect, using insincerity to offer a teachable moment.

But hold everything right here!

How could I not observe, right here, a teachable moment from last Sunday. Last Sunday our congregation here at St. Philip's directly benefited from a retelling and lecture on this parable by Professor Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt University. In her recorded talk during the Dean's Forum, Prof. Levine retold the Parable of the Good Samaritan as a Jewish story, but also as a story about sincerity and authenticity. She began by renaming the story as the 'Parable of the Person who Fell among Thieves' instead of the Parable of the Good Samaritan; because there were many good Samaritans in that day and not just one who happened to do a good deed on a particular occasion.

Beyond that intervention, Prof. Levine went on to appreciate an insight from Dr. Martin Luther King that connects with both our readings appointed for today. Dr. King once suggested why the priest and the Levite in the parable, both of whom saw the man wounded by thieves, passed by on the other side of the road. 'They passed him by,' King supposed, 'because they were thinking what might happen to themselves if thieves were still in the area. But the Samaritan stopped and helped because he was thinking, not about what might happen to himself, but what might happen to the wounded man if no one stopped to help him.'

Like the Samaritan in the parable, Prof. Levine concluded, Dr. King went on his last mission to help striking garbage workers in Memphis, Tennessee because he was attending more to what might happen to them than to what might happen to himself. In that way Dr. King was a neighbor to those workers in a way that fulfilled the twin commandments to love God on the one hand and also one's neighbor as oneself. And in that way, we may acknowledge on this eve of All Saints Day, the King achieved the final expression of his life as a life of sincerity and authenticity.

But the life and death of Dr. King also echoes our first Lesson appointed for today, from the Book of Ruth (1:6-7; 11-18). At the climactic moment of that reading we hear Ruth proclaim to her mother-in-law:

"Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God" (vs. 16).

Now that virtue of authentic devotion to her mother-in-law was paramount for Dr. King as well. Like Ruth, moreover, he exemplified that virtue also in ethnic and spiritual terms. First, in ethnic terms he appealed to his fellow Americans to live in solidarity with one another across our multiracial differences. That is, he exhorted each of us to aspire to be saying to one another, 'your people shall be my people.' That was the hallmark of his sincerity as he worked for solidarity with white Americans during the struggle for civil and human rights in his lifetime.

Whereas he personally resisted the voices that would alienate U.S. Americans from one another, he also sought to foster such solidarity among others. And here we may refer to Jesus' expression, "not far from the kingdom of God." But instead of saying, "not far from the kingdom of God," Dr. King offered the variation, 'not long to the day of our solidarity.' Listen to this classic speech that he delivered after the successful March from Selma to Montgomery in 1965:

I know you are asking today, "*How long* will it take?" Somebody's asking, "*How long* will prejudice blind the visions of men, darken their understanding, and drive bright-eyed wisdom from her sacred throne?" Somebody's asking, "*When* will wounded justice, lying prostrate on our streets . . . and communities . . . be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men?" Somebody's asking . . . *How long* will justice be crucified, and truth buried?"

Now here is where King complemented his humanist vision with a cascade of quotations that ended with religious affirmations from The Battle Hymn of the Republic

[Well] I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because "truth crushed to earth will rise again." *How long? Not long*, because "no lie can live forever." *How long? Not long*, because "you shall reap what you sow."

. . . *How long? Not long*, because 'the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.'

How long? Not long, because:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord . . .

His truth is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;

He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat.

O, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant my feet!

Our God is marching on.

Glory, hallelujah! Glory, hallelujah!

Glory, hallelujah! Glory, hallelujah!

His truth is marching on. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_Long,_Not_Long

So it is, Christian friends and friends of Christ, so it is that we can hear echoed in our hymns and Psalms and prayers today a holy refrain.

'*How far* from the kingdom of God?' *Not far*, as in the words of our opening hymn this morning we affirmed: to Jesus belong 'the scepter and the crown.' (Hymn 460)

'*How far* from the kingdom of God?' *Not far*, as in the words of our Psalm appointed for Evensong we affirm: 'the earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world and all who dwell therein.' (Psalm 24)

'*How far* from the kingdom of God?' *Not far*, as in the words of our sequence hymn we affirm: 'what does the Lord require for praise and offering [but that we] do justly; love mercy; and walk humbly with our God.' (Hymn 605)

'*How far* from the kingdom of God?' *Not far*, as in the words of our communion hymn this morning we affirm: 'God will surely bless all those who live the words they pray.' (Hymn 517)

'*How far* from the kingdom of God?' *Not far*, as in the words of our closing hymn we affirm: 'A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing . . .

Because 'God's word above all earthly powers, no thanks to them abideth . . .'

Because 'the Spirit and the gifts are ours, through him who with us sideth . . .'

And here we affirm by faith that we 'love the Lord our God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves,' as in the final words of that hymn we affirm: 'God's truth abideth still; God's kingdom is forever.' (Hymn 688).
Amen.

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