

Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
Sunday, November 1, 2009
Rev. William Love

NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Hebrews 9:11-14

Mark 12:28-34

A young man came to Rainer Maria Rilke, seeking his advice on whether or not he should be a poet. Rilke's advice, in part, was: *You ask whether your verses are good. You ask me. You have asked others before. You send them to magazines. You compare them with other poems, and you are disturbed when certain editors reject your efforts. Now...I beg you to give up all that. You are looking outward and that above all you should not do now. Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody. There is only one single way.* [Henri Nouwen, **Reaching Out**, 27]

* * *

A young scribe came upon the religious leaders who were disputing among themselves and trying to trap Jesus with their questions. He listened long enough to know that Jesus answered their questions wisely and well. He asked a question of his own: *Which commandment is the first of all?*

Jesus answered, *The first is, "Hear, O Israel, 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." The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."* The first comes from Deuteronomy; the second, from Leviticus, which the religious leaders would have known and would have remembered if their intent had been to learn of God rather than to trick Jesus.

The scribe had no intention of tricking Jesus. There is no malice in his question. If anything, he came to Jesus' rescue (though Jesus did not need it) silencing the critics by reminding them of the meeting point of truth about God and human life. He may have been seeking as well an answer for himself.

The scribe repeats Jesus' words for the ones there, *You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that God is one, and there is no other but God; and to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.*

Jesus saw that the scribe answered wisely and said, *You are not far from the kingdom of God.*

* * *

We would not have to do much reflecting on the events of our world or of our own individual lives to realize that people generally and ourselves in particular do not love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, neither do we love our neighbors or ourselves as God intended us to love.

It is not that we intend to love less or to compromise our devotion by conflicting loyalties. And yet we do.

God did not intend that fulfilling this commandment should be awesomely difficult, as it seems to us, or that it should seem a hopeless task. God intended

that this love should be as natural as eating and sleeping and breathing out and breathing in.

The difference between the way God intended things to be and the way they actually are is called, in theological language, Sin. And, by whatever name we call it, it affects our love of God, of others, and ourselves.

If we think of it in terms of the last part of this commandment, sin takes a person, whose actions should be what Christ unapologetically, unhesitatingly called *Love* and replaces love with something else that comes in different guises, replacing ease with dis-ease. The person who should feel comfortable inside his or her own skin is uncomfortable. The ability to form caring relationships with others becomes a kind of clinging desperation. Others become not human beings we love but a means to ease our own feelings of uneasiness when left alone.

One name for it is **loneliness**, separated from God and each other and our own selves. Not in a loving relationship but in a relationship designed to mask the loneliness.

* * *

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Christian who was martyred by the Nazis in World War II, said: *Many people seek fellowship because they are afraid to be alone. Because they cannot stand loneliness, they are driven to seek the company of other people. There are Christians, too, who cannot endure being alone, who have had some bad experiences with themselves, who hope they will gain some help in association with others. They are generally disappointed.. Then they blame the fellowship for what is really their own fault. The Christian community is not a spiritual sanatorium. The person who is coming into a fellowship because he is running away from himself is misusing it for the sake of diversion, no matter how spiritual this diversion may appear to be. He is not really seeking community at all, but only distraction which will allow him to forget his loneliness for a brief time.* [Bonhoeffer, **Life Together**, 76]

Our loneliness would not only leave us lonely but try to keep us there. The distractions, the diversions which allow us to forget our loneliness for a while do not come to us without consequence.

Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest, has written that *when our loneliness drives us away from ourselves into the arms of our companions in life, we are, in fact, driving ourselves into excruciating relationships, tiring relationships, and suffocating embraces. To wait for moments or places where no pain exists, no separation is felt and where all human restlessness has turned into inner peace is waiting for a dreamworld. No friend or lover, no husband or wife, no community or commune will be able to put to rest our deepest cravings for unity and wholeness. And by burdening others with these divine expectations, of which we ourselves are often only partially aware, we might inhibit the expression of free friendships and love and evoke instead feelings of inadequacy and weakness.* [Nouwen, 19]

* * *

God was not, is not content that loneliness should have its way. Christ died on the cross and was raised that loneliness would not have its way. And Christ gave us the Holy Spirit that we could move away from loneliness toward the life where we can love ourselves [and thus others and God] as God intends us to love.

The Spirit does not lead us away from being alone toward being with others. It is not being alone that is the problem but loneliness. Being with others is not necessarily the answer. As Bonhoeffer said, loneliness can cause us to use and abuse others.

The Holy Spirit brings to us a new quality of living with ourselves. The Spirit moves us from loneliness to solitude, a receptive kind of solitude of the heart, in which we can be attentive to life — not only attentive to other people but also attentive to our own inner self. Not being alone and escaping the world and its problems and demands, solitude is a quality of living with oneself, of getting in touch with oneself, and loving the Self we find.

Perhaps like a flower bulb and the flower that grows from it, it is the flower that is seen and admired, just as our external appearances and behavior are seen and regarded. The flower, when it is picked and put on display, withers and dies because it is separated from the bulb and the root system that gives it life.

It is our inner self that gives life to the outer self. And our outer self must maintain its relationship with the inner self.

It is not easy. Life puts so many layers of distractions and conflicting loyalties and demands. It is the quality of solitude that makes it possible to nurture the inner self.

Thomas Merton, a Christian monk and hermit, wrote about his own experience of solitude: *though "out of the world" we are in the same world as everybody else,...the world of race hatred, the world of technology, the world of mass media, big business, revolution, and all the rest. We take a different attitude to all these things, for we belong to God. Yet so does everybody else belong to God. ...[T]his sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. It is a glorious destiny to be a member of the human race, though it is a race dedicated to many absurdities and one which makes many terrible mistakes: yet, with all that, God...gloried in becoming a member of the human race! To think that such a commonplace realization would suddenly seem like news that one holds the winning ticket in a cosmic sweepstake. I have the immense joy of being [human], a member of a race in which God...became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are walking around shining like the sun.*

[Nouwen, 29]

* * *

Henri Nouwen, who taught at Yale Divinity School, told of a former student who came back to visit. After catching up on the events of each other's life since they had last seen each other, they fell into a comfortable kind of silence. The former student said, after some time, *When I am with you it is as if I am in the presence of Christ.* Nouwen said, *It is the Christ in you who recognizes the Christ in me.*

That is what the quality of solitude brings us. We are able to look deep into our inner self, past the loneliness and insecurity and see at the very center of our being: the crucified and risen Christ.

We are not alone with an inadequate self. We are in the presence of God with a self in which God dwells.

With that Self before God, we come to the commandment to love.

* * *

Just as the rich young man who sought eternal life came lacking one thing, so did the scribe. *You are not far from the kingdom*, Jesus said. Not far, but not there quite yet.

He saw in the religious leaders who posed clever questions to trap Jesus all he needed to see to know that the Law, which had at one time characterized a dynamic relationship between God and Israel, had lost its heart and had been reduced to picayune trick questions. No longer life-affirming, now squeezing the life out of their relationship with God.

He knew the right priority of the law. But knowing the right answer, believing the right things does not give life either.

His understanding is correct. There is more.

* * *

The student who came to Rilke wanting to know if he should be a poet had, in one sense, sought to come to right belief about his poetry. He had asked others. He had sent them to magazines. Rilke told him, *I beg you to give up all that. You are looking outward and that above all you should not do now. Nobody can counsel and help you, nobody. There is only one single way. Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you to write; find out whether it is spreading out its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you have to die if it were denied you to write. This above all — ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: **must** I write? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple **I must**, then build your life according to this necessity; your life even into its most indifferent and slightest hour must be a sign of this urge and a testimony to it.* [Nouwen, 29]

* * *

This the scribe lacked. And Rilke's advice to the incipient poet might have served the scribe well and certainly will serve us. *Go into yourself. Search for the reason that bids you to love God and others as you love yourself; find out whether it is spreading its roots in the deepest places of your heart, acknowledge to yourself whether you have to die if it were denied you to love. This above all — ask yourself in the stillest hour of your night: **must** I love? Delve into yourself for a deep answer. And if this should be affirmative, if you may meet this earnest question with a strong and simple **I must**, then build your life according to this necessity; your life even into its most indifferent and slightest hour must be a sign of this urge to love and a testimony to it.*

Then we will be living not just close to the Kingdom; we will be living in the Kingdom.