

November 10th message

Somewhere in your Christian Education you probably learned that the book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible. You also might have learned that it is located near the middle of the Bible so it is easy to find. This week I read in my devotion booklet something I'd never really thought of before. The author spoke of how the Psalms is the only book in the Bible written to God. While about half were written by David, we can't be quite sure of the author of Psalm 146 and many others.

Psalm 146 and the four that follow it to the end all start and end with the phrase, "Praise the Lord!" This is good for us to hear at any time but especially today. When we give praise to God we take our minds off the worries and problems we may be facing. This praise doesn't do away with what ails us rather it lifts our perspective from the earthly to the heavenly. We can easily get caught up in the events of the present day and neglect to remember how God is supreme. The Psalmist tells how one should not put their hope in princes or mortal man, but rather how the Lord is our hope and salvation. It is God who executes justice, it is God who feeds the hungry, raises up those who are bowed down, thwarts the way of the wicked, sets the prisoners free and opens the eyes of the blind.

We may read how prisoners set free and how the blind have their eyes open and not get the whole meaning. We can be prisoners of our sin and not realize how we don't see the life God wishes for us. These words can apply to all, including us. Perhaps we can grow impatient wondering when these things will occur. But make no mistake about it, God is still at work in our world. He works through His people everywhere including you and me.

Jesus knew the Psalms and often referenced them in His teachings. Jesus had a way of teaching about the grace of God that's values were the opposite of His time and all through history. When He taught 'those who are first will be last and the last first,' it was with this knowledge from this Psalm and others from Hebrew scripture. Today's gospel also shows how Jesus knew scripture.

Right before this in the gospel according to Mark, Jesus is being interrogated by different religious leaders one after another. Different groups of people had begun to work together to try to discredit Jesus the week before He faced the cross.

On Monday of Holy Week, he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and disrupted the sales of doves because the people were being taken advantage of. The next day he was approached by the chief priests, the scribes and the elders. They did their best to trick him, but failed. Next, some Pharisees and Herodians, two very unlikely allies worked together to question Him about paying taxes. And then some Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection, approached Jesus. They asked a very hypothetical situation about marriage in the resurrection. Each and every time, Jesus answered in a way that silenced any more questions.

Finally, we are told someone steps forward identified as a scribe. Mark mentions how he noted how Jesus had answered the questions well. He was not with a group and didn't appear to have any ulterior motives in mind. Scribes were the intellectuals of the day who knew the scriptures well, especially the first five books called the Torah.

Being a scribe with his question was his way of cutting to the chase and getting right to the heart of the matter. He is impressed by the answer Jesus gives. Jesus cuts through all the laws and interpretations other may have and basically sums up the law and commandments in two sentences. And what a summary this is!

When you learned the commandments perhaps you learned how they were divided into two parts: the first four having to do with our relationship toward God and the final six having to do with our dealings with our fellow man. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. The scribe is so impressed he comments how Jesus understood the intent of God's law, how true obedience comes from one's heart. Jesus then replies, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

“You are not far from the kingdom of God,” is quite a statement when you really think about it. At a glance, it is much like, ‘you’re on the right track.’

Just yesterday, I officiated a wedding in Keokuk. It was a young couple in their early thirties who have known each other for a while. They, like many couples chose to have 1st Corinthians 13 read. You know it, it’s the famous love chapter Paul wrote. But you probably also know Paul did not write this chapter in this letter as a response to how one should approach marriage although what he says applies. People in the Corinth church at the time had become divided thinking their gifts of the spirit were more important than others. One could say they were far from the kingdom of God. So Paul had to set them straight.

This week I read how theologians have debated what Jesus meant by “not far.” In other words, how far away was he?” What does such a person need to do to go the rest of the way? Scribes were considered experts in knowing the law, but as we all have witnessed saying and doing are two different things. Or to put it in more practical terms did the scribe practice what he preached?

A story in Ministry Matters tells of a church men’s softball team. The team they played on a certain occasion had been a rival of theirs for years. One of the players hit a hard line drive to center field and quickly ran to first base, then tried to stretch into a double. The outfielder made a perfect throw to the second baseman. The play was close, but the runner was called out. The player protested the call and began yelling at the umpire. His team encouraged him to get off the field, but his anger escalated. When they finally got him off the field, they admonished him to remember who he was and what he represented. They reminded him that young people and perhaps people who did not know Christ were watching him. Was this what he wanted them to see?

This player got caught up in the moment and lost perspective. One article I read about this spoke about how we need a balance between our inner and outer lives. He spoke of how every day can be like a mission trip. Our relationships with others are a reflection of our relationship with God. When we love God with all our

heart, mind, soul and strength we must also love and serve the people around us, the two should go together.

As I thought of that I realized just how tough that is, especially through the times we are living. Many will claim they love God, but then hate their neighbor who is different or whom they do not share the same opinions. If this is the case then one is far from the kingdom.

When Jesus tells the scribe he is not far perhaps Jesus meant that knowing these two great commandments is only the first step. Now he needs to live it. In a way, Jesus has given an assignment. Now he needs to put in the time and live a life of loving God and loving people.

This kind of love in the words of Paul is patient and kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. It does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

We see so much of the opposite. After the election there was a lot out there on social media criticizing the way people voted. One person even went so far as to say she would have no more to do with the people who voted differently than her. Like our softball player's example this is not what others need to see.

So as we look ahead and our lives, let us ask ourselves; What is keeping us from being not far from the kingdom of God? How do we better love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength and our neighbor accordingly. Perhaps this illustration will help:

Picture a person who knows and tells Bible stories to others. Seeing an acorn she replies, "God is making another tree." If you were feeling down, she would remind you that "God is with us." Every morning she gives thanks for each and every new day and the opportunities they present. In every aspect of life she empties her whole heart and soul to the God she could not see. She also believes, 'I must love the unlovable as much as I love God.'

“I must love the unlovable as much as I love God.” As we all know that is much easier said than done. But such an attitude also shows how one is not far from the kingdom.

In October of 2017 a gunman open fire in the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, 11 worshippers were killed and 6 wounded. The shooter was seriously wounded and taken to a nearby hospital. The doctor who attended him was Dr. Jeffrey Cohen, a member of the same synagogue. When he was brought into the Allegheny General Hospital, he was still yelling anti-Semitic curses. An FBI agent watched how Dr. Cohen greeted the shooter, sat down next to him, talked to him and tried to understand him, and then how he handed him off to the medical team to dress the man’s wounds. The agent said, “I don’t think I could have done what you just did.” Dr. Cohen nodded in understanding; and he did it anyway.

He did it anyway. That’s the challenge for us today: to care about and help the unlovable. We have this teaching and more importantly the example of Christ. May God, by His grace, help us in our journey to get closer to the kingdom. Amen.