

Psalms 115

Hymn: "Trinune God, Be Thou Our Stay-505 LSB

WHEN FAR IS NOT CLOSE ENOUGH

Saint Mark 12:28-34

The victim of a boating accident swims toward shore. Just a few feet from safety, the swimmer, exhausted, slips beneath the waves. He was not far from land, but not far is not close enough. A student struggles with a class. At the end of the term he is just one point away from a passing grade in the class with a curve. Not far from passing; but not far is not close enough. Do you get the point? The scribe in this morning's text is not far from the Kingdom, but not far is not close enough. In fact, the scribe's answer shows that he knows what God wants: "There is one God...And to love Him with all the heart with all the soul, and with all the strength and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" It was a wise answer, says St. Mark. It shows us what the Lord wants.

The Lord God wants you and He wants the whole of you. God doesn't deal in fractions or parts. He says, "I am the Lord your God and you shall have no other gods before me" It is the burning passion of the true and living God to be the Lord over your life – every inch of it, and in all of its dimensions: heart soul, mind and strength. The two tables of the Law cover all of human life. Nothing is held back from the Lord God.

For that reason, the Lord describes himself as a jealous God. True love does not exist without jealousy. Jealousy here is not a self-centered greed, but every desire of our loving Lord to have you to Himself. You are his beloved and He does not want to share you with sin or any idol. Israel's 40 years in the wilderness was her honeymoon with God. There in the desert between Egypt and the promised land, the Lord was teaching His bride, Israel, how to fear, love, and trust in Him above all things.

Israel did not learn that lesson very well and neither do we. Who can say that they love the Lord God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind with all their strength? Who can say that every desire of his heart has been in complete alignment with the heart of God? Who here can say that his soul is without the stain of disobedience to God who will one day judge the souls of all who have ever lived? Who here can say that every thought of his mind has been taken captive by Christ Jesus? Who here can say that all his strength, all his might, all his energy has been completely directed to service and worship of the Lord alone? Not far is not close enough!

God gets in us exactly what He got in Israel. He said to Israel in the Old Testament: Beware, lest you forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." Israel forgot the Lord and His love. God gets exchanged for a golden calf.

The Law was given not only to Israel but to the whole world that every mouth might be shut and the world held accountable to God. The holy commandments our God show you your sin. Your

failure to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength...and your failure to love your neighbor as yourself.

That Law of God shows you, as it did the scribe, that your best efforts, your right answers to questions about the Law are not enough. It is as the Apostle James writes in his epistle: "For whoever shall keep the whole law and stumble in one point, he is guilty of all" (2:10). When it comes to a holy God and His law, not far is not close enough. It is as Luther puts it in one of his hymns:

"Before Thee none can boasting stand,
But all must fear Thy strict demand
And live alone by mercy" (607:2 LSB)

There is no way that we can achieve a place in God's Kingdom. That Kingdom is given us by grace through faith in the King who, in fact, did, for us and our salvation, actually love the Lord His God with all His heart, His soul, His mind, and His strength. Our King is the One who was born of woman, born under the law to redeem those under the curse of the Law. The life He lived was sinless, not only in the fact that our Lord refrained from sinning, but also that He actively and in our place kept the whole Law of God, loving His Father with all of His being and loving His neighbor as Himself. We see it throughout His life. He was there in the temple as a boy of 12 years saying, "I must be about my Father's business" He was there in the desert, tempted by Satan, yet overcoming each temptation with the Word of God. And He loves His neighbor – indeed, the whole world – so much as to lay down His life on the hard wood of a Roman cross as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. In His cross all of your sin is answered for by His Blood. Your half-heartedness toward God is covered by the blood of God's own Son whose heart was filled with compassion for sinners who loved Him not. Your sin-stained soul is made clean by the forgiveness sins won by this King at Calvary. Your mind, darkened by sin and unbelief, is enlightened by the light of the glory of the knowledge of Christ Jesus. Your strength is re-focused away from simply survival and self-preservation so you can live by faith Him who loved you and give Himself for you.

This is what Christ gives you in His kingdom. His Kingdom comes as pure gift. The only way to receive it is by faith. Remember the Catechism:

The Kingdom of God comes indeed without our prayer,
of itself; but we pray in this petition that it may come
unto us also.

How is this done?

When our heavenly Father gives us His Holy Spirit, so that
By His grace we believe His holy Word and lead a godly life,
here in time and hereafter in eternity.

AMEN.

Professor John Pless (CTS Ft. Wayne, IN)