A Storytelling Commentary on Mark 12:28-34

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The story of Jesus and the scribe is the one unequivocally positive interactions between Jesus and a representative of the Jewish establishment in Mark. It is a legal discussion and needs to be told in the style of rabbinic arguments and discussions. The scribe's question is a question that was frequently asked in rabbinic discussions. There were 613 commandments in the Torah: 248 that were positive, 365 that were negative. There were extensive discussions among the rabbis about which were heavy and light; that is, which were of greater and lesser importance. These debates were an effort to sort through the multitude of laws and commandments and identify which ones were most important.

The character of this kind of discussion is reflected in a story that was told about Hillel and Shammia in the Babylonian Talmud. John Donohue tells it in his commentary on Mark. A Gentile came to Shammia, a conservative rabbi, and said to him, "I will become a proselyte if you can tell me the whole of the Torah while I stand on one foot." Shammia got a wood stick and chased him away. The Gentile went to Hillel and asked him the same question. Hillel said, "Whatever you find hateful, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole of the law. Everything else is commentary. Go and learn this." Hillel responds in a way that is like the way in which Jesus responds. What Jesus cites as the center of the Torah is the golden rule, or what was called the "Silver Commandment."

Jesus' answer to this question is different than Hillel's. Jesus cites the most central tradition of Israel, the Shema, from Deuteronomy 6:4. "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 strength." Even with the Shema, Jesus adds to the tradition. Jesus adds the phrase, "with all your mind." In the context of the Greco-Roman world, this addition was probably needed because Gentiles and others did not assume, as was the case in the ancient world when Deuteronomy was originally composed, that the heart was the center of understanding. For the ancient Hebrews, to love God with all your mind was included in the phrase "all your heart." But that was no longer the case in Jesus' day. To add "with all your mind" was also to focus on the intellectual love of God.

The most distinctive dimension of Jesus' interpretation of the law is that he combines the Shema with the commandment from Leviticus to "love your neighbor as yourself." The significance of this in its context is that Jesus neither neglected the love of God nor the love of neighbor. This story is both a devotional/theological answer and an ethical answer. In Jesus' teaching, the love of God is intimately connected with the love of neighbor and vice versa.

In telling the story, it is important to make the tone of the story one of mutual respect between Jesus and the scribe. Too often this story is read with a kind of superior attitude toward the scribe. The tone is a putdown of the scribe. I am sure that was not how Mark told the story. The attitude toward the scribe needs to be positive. His words should be told to convey an attitude of respect for Jesus as a teacher as he says back to him in his own words what Jesus had said, and contrasts that with the normative priestly tradition (that the most important thing in the law was to make sacrifices and to bring offerings to the temple). He agrees with Jesus' interpretation. Jesus' words, then, are the strongest praise that he gives to any scribe or teacher of the law in the whole of the gospel tradition: "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

This is a wonderful story that reflects the positive dimensions of the discussions that Jesus had with other Jewish teachers in his time. The issue that is discussed by Jesus and the scribe remains a lively issue now. What is the most important dimension of the law and of our obedience to God? Is it the Ten Commandments? Is it the Golden rule? Is it these commandments of Jesus? If so, what do they really mean in people's lives?

The love of neighbor is at the heart of ethics and it is intimately connected with the love of God. The reason to love one's neighbor is an outgrowth of the energy that comes from the love relationship with God. A relationship founded in the love of God but that does not find expression in love of neighbors is misplaced love. It is not complete. These two commandments do constitute a central focus of our attention and are worthy of our memory, our prayer, and our action.