

God's realm comes with mandate to love God and one's neighbor

TRINITARIAN CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Rev. JULIE G. OLMSTED

Trinitarian Congregational Church

In the Gospel of Mark, 12th chapter, Jesus is being peppered with questions. The religious “elites” of his day, the Pharisees, Sadducees and others, were testing him to see if he was the “real deal.” They ask him to whom to show deference (to “God or to the emperor”), about wives in the resurrection, and which commandment is the most important. I can imagine that Jesus became weary and more than a little irritated by these questions, especially since they really weren't that interested in the answers; they were looking to trick him and find chinks in his teachings.

When Jesus answers the question about the most important commandment, he answers with the correctness of his Jewish faith: “Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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 scribe agrees and takes it even further, “This is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Jesus' response is striking: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

The above is a remarkable conversation that merits deep contemplation. The scribe has said that above all burnt offerings and sacrifices is the love of God, and the practice of the challenge to actually love one's neighbor as oneself. Jesus not only affirms this statement but goes it one further: “This is the way to the kingdom of God.” You are not far. It is at hand.

That's what I'm talking about, friend. The people of Jesus' day lived under the emperor's rule. It was his “kingdom.” The emperor was often referred to as “the son of God.” Those who lived under his rule were his subjects and paid taxes to his “realm.” Just a few verses earlier, Jesus points this out and instructs his listeners to “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's...” In the teachings of Jesus, we have a diametrically opposite “kingdom” or “realm” to aspire to. It transcends politics; it transcends race and gender; it transcends even different denominations and ultimately, all faiths. It is the mandate to

love God and love one's neighbor equal to oneself. This, says Jesus, is the way to the kingdom (the vernacular of the day), or the one true realm of God.

More important than burnt offerings, more important than your particular brand or belief vis-à-vis the crucifixion and the resurrection. Love God; love your neighbor as yourself. So simple, but clearly, not so easy.

This mandate is a lifelong project that we are always correcting, examining and challenging ourselves to. I believe that is the Christian life. I have to ask myself, "Does this action I'm about to take reflect my love of God? Am I treating my neighbor the way I would want to be treated?"

Even if it hurts, my boss' orders are spelled out for me in the Great Commandment. Even if it looks like it's not worth it — for example, that I won't get anything out of the deal — all the better.

That, says my king (my boss, my savior), is none of my business. That will all get worked out in the future, which is in God's hands.



The Rev. Julie Olmsted of the Trinitarian Congressional Church in Northfield .

PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ



The Trinitarian Congregational Church in Northfield.

PHOTO/PAUL FRANZ