

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
31<sup>st</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
November 2, 2003

**“Not Far”**

**Mark 12:28-34; Job 38:1-7, 34-41**

The sermon today is about spiritual growth.  
We talk a lot about spiritual growth in the Presbyterian Church,  
some even prefer that term these days for what used to be called Christian education.  
By saying ‘spiritual growth’ instead of ‘Christian education’ we imply that  
    people need something more than just information to grow in the faith.  
And ‘Christian education’ has too often been focused too narrowly  
    on learning information: doctrine, or history.  
So we’ve tried to capture that ‘something more’ by speaking of spiritual growth.  
But what is spiritual growth, exactly? How do we know when it is happening?  
Well, that’s a big question – bigger than any one sermon.  
But today’s gospel reading moves us in a good direction in answering it.

Today, we find Jesus in the Temple  
    in the midst of a series of arguments  
    with the chief priest, and scribes, and elders.  
They are trying to trip Jesus up, or pin him down,  
    or in some way show him to be a fraud.

But then along comes this scribe,  
    who passes by and hears these arguments going on,  
    and he is *impressed* with how Jesus answers his opponents.  
So he approaches Jesus and asks him a question,  
    and the text would suggest that, unlike the others,  
    this scribe is sincere in his asking:  
    “Which commandment is the first of all?”  
Unlike the others, we get the impression that this guy really wants to know;  
    he truly wants to know God, and believes Jesus can lead him to the truth.

Jesus’ answer to him has become very familiar to us.  
It is his summary of the law:  
    Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind, and strength,  
    and love your neighbor as yourself.  
    There is no other commandment greater than these.

The sincere scribe agrees with Jesus’ answer, saying  
    “You are right, Teacher,  
    this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

But it’s Jesus answer to him at this point that intrigues me most:

*When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him,  
“You are NOT FAR from the kingdom of God.”*

NOT FAR! Wow! It seems that Jesus ought to have said,  
“Yes, Mr. Scribe! On the nose! You’ve got it! You have arrived!”  
Loving God and loving the neighbor is the central theme not only of Jesus teaching,  
but of his life, and ultimately of his suffering, death and resurrection.  
And this guy get it! He is in synch with Jesus, but the best he gets is  
“NOT FAR from the kingdom of God.”

The thing that is intriguing here, is that the text strongly implies  
that Jesus is actually paying this guy a compliment.  
He’s not saying: “So close yet so far”.  
He’s saying: “Nice answer. You are really, REALLY close to the kingdom.”  
So, it seems, even when we’re doing really well in the spiritual life  
we still fall short of God’s kingdom.  
What does this say about spiritual growth?

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One of the reasons these words “not far” have caught my attention, I’m sure,  
is that I’ve dropped in on a few Coffee and Conversation classes recently,  
and Dale Allison has got me interested in a certain 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop and mystic,  
Gregory of Nyssa.<sup>1</sup>

At the heart of Gregory’s understanding of the Christian life,  
is a notion of *spiritual growth*,  
which he refers to as the soul’s *perpetual progress*.

Gregory understands the Christian life as a journey, or a quest,  
in which the soul makes continual progress toward God  
but never actually achieves a full knowledge of God,  
never actually enjoys a full participation in the presence of God.

In our relationship with God – as I understand Gregory – we grow in stages.  
And to grow means to seek continually to go beyond the stage we have reached.  
The good news about this kind of growth, this perpetual progress,  
is that every stage is a good place to be.  
So long as we are continually striving to move beyond the stage we have reached,  
and never become complacent where we are,  
then all stages of spiritual growth are good.  
Every stage is a part of the process of perfection,  
a process of growing into the image of God.

In Gregory’s understanding, sin would be, simply,  
the refusal to grow, the willingness to be stuck,

to become complacent in one's relationship with God.  
To be faithful, on the other hand, is to understand that  
wherever you are is a starting point for the next stage of your spiritual growth;  
wherever you are is the beginning of the next leg of the journey  
in your soul's quest for God.

So, good questions to ask might be...

- As you learn to love your neighbor as yourself, where are you being challenged?  
What are the difficulties? Where do you get stuck?  
These difficulties in loving your neighbor don't make you a bad person,  
unless you are content to stay there.  
The difficulties are rather the next step of your growth toward God.
- Or (I would be remiss during stewardship season if I failed to ask):  
What about your generosity, your sacrificial giving?  
How are you being challenged to be generous?  
What sacrifices or changes are you being called to make, and perhaps resisting?  
These resistances may be calling you toward the next stage  
of your spiritual growth.
- Or what about your anxiety about the future? Are you trusting God to guide you?  
Are you facing your fears and giving them over to God's care through prayer?  
Wrestling with those things that worry you may be the entry point  
into the next stage of your spiritual growth.

Wherever you are on the journey, whatever your struggles may be,  
this is the starting point for the next stage of your quest for God,  
and it is, therefore, a good place...  
...so long as you are not content to stay there.

So at each new stage of growth in the Christian life  
we realize we have more growing yet to do.  
With each step closer to God, we find that we have not finally arrived  
but must continue to journey forward.

But, wait a minute!

Does this mean that Christian faith never actually brings us into relationship with God,  
but only shows us over and over again that we're not there yet?

Is the Christian life just a process of always striving  
but never reaching the ultimate goal,  
never attaining a full knowledge of God,  
never loving my neighbor enough,  
never trusting my future to God completely,  
never being quiet as generous as I think I should be?  
Is this not the definition of suffering?

If we are continually striving but never reaching,  
if we are always deprived of the thing we seek,  
will this not just lead us into despair?

Gregory says “no.”

We do reach fulfillment in our quest for God, in our spiritual growth,  
but every fulfillment of our desire for God, generates more desire  
because every new stage of growth expands the soul,  
so that we long for even more of God.

Each time we get it right, each time we take a step closer to the kingdom of God,  
we find, in the midst of that fulfillment,

that while we are closer, we are not yet there.

So we move from fulfillment to fulfillment, from glory to glory.

We draw ever nearer and find that we are NOT FAR from the kingdom of God,  
yet still we have further to go...

And somewhere along the way, we turn from despair to fulfillment  
when we come to realize that

*true satisfaction in the spiritual life is found not in the arrival  
but in constantly going on in the quest.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Consider Job, in his spiritual quest.

In our reading a few weeks ago, Job couldn't wait to get his hands on God.

He was sure that if he could ever just get God to show up and listen,  
he could make God understand the situation,  
his life would be vindicated,  
and he would be satisfied that he was in the right.

But in our reading today, when he does finally get his hands on God  
(or is it God whose hands are on Job?),

Job does not come away with a final resolution to his quest;  
he has not arrived at the end of his journey;

Rather, God has a few questions for Job!

And by those questions it becomes clear that

God remains beyond him still,  
and Job has more growing yet to do.

Job finds that he must be satisfied with constantly going on in his quest.

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So if the Christian life is about “keeping on,”

what keeps us keeping on?

What keeps us making progress in our spiritual growth?

The question brings us back to the first principle of Jesus life and ministry:

*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.  
And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

Jesus would place our love for God and our love for our neighbor  
at the forefront of our spiritual quest.

It is this love that keeps us going forward.

Apart from this love, apart from this deep desire for God,  
and this deep concern for our neighbor,  
the Christian life becomes just empty religious trappings and ceremonies,  
like whole burnt offerings and sacrifices,  
which do very little if the heart is not right.

But if we can cut through the outer layers of our religiosity  
and find in our hearts a deep desire for God, a deep thirst for God,  
then we will be drawn forward on the journey,  
from glory to glory.

Of course, you may cut through these outer layers  
and find that in your heart you have very little desire for God.

If that is so, I would suggest an honest prayer as the place to start.

Tell God where your heart *is*, and let that be your starting point.

Ask God to give you the desire to seek him;  
even this kind of prayer, acknowledging complacency,  
is a step beyond complacency.

For it is not the arrival at perfect love of God and the neighbor,  
but the *continual striving toward* such love that is the essence of spiritual growth.

As you *strive* to love God with every fiber of your being,  
and love your neighbor as yourself,  
you will find at each step of that challenging journey  
that you are NOT FAR from the kingdom of God.

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<sup>i</sup> The following discussion of Gregory of Nyssa is based entirely on the work of Jean Danielou, S. J., in *From Glory to Glory* (New York: Charles Scribner's Son, 1961)