

Not Far From the Realm

By Rev. Todd Farnsworth

Mark 12:28-34



*28 One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”**29** “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.[a] **30** Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’[b] **31** The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’[c] There is no commandment greater than these.” **32** “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. **33** To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” **34** When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.*

In the time of the Great World War 1 (1914-1918) houses of worship were teaching that we were engaged in a Holy War. References to the Book of Revelations were used to cast the enemy as the antichrist and posit the allies as winning this for Christ! America and our allies were seen as being

avored nations on the right side of the battle lines and so whatever became necessary to win the war was believed to be OK with God. Trench warfare. Chemical warfare. Depth charges. Orchestrated attacks on civilians.

It must have been a staggering jolt to the moral compass of those who had grown up here in Briarcliff or in other small towns, learning the lessons that Mark puts forth today:

“Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

29 *“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.*

The words, *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.”* was learned by Christians and Jews, alike. It was the centerpiece of teaching that unlike the gods of other cults, our God was ONE GOD. And that ONE GOD called us to love. To care. To steward life.

30 *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’[b]* **31** *The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’[c] There is no commandment greater than these.”*

The lessons that Mark had put forth in today’s reading were usurped by a green light to killing the enemy...but alas, the teachings of the *Shema* were more deeply entrenched in the souls of the combatants than the lust for war. The deaths experienced 100 years ago must have rocked the lives of

those who brought about the deaths and those who witnessed them...and coming home was probably very confusing.

Going back to church. Back to community. 16, 000,000 lives lost as a direct result of the war. In the years that followed this carnage, the Spanish flu must have felt like Divine retribution as the Spanish Flu took an additional 50-100 million lives. I have no doubt that those who returned home, despite the parades and flags that awaited them, struggled with moral injury.

For those of you unfamiliar with the term, *Moral injury* “refers to an ***injury*** to an individual's ***moral*** conscience resulting from an act of perceived ***moral*** transgression which produces profound emotional shame. The concept of ***moral injury*** emphasizes the psychological, social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of trauma.”

It is not surprising that several military support groups formed following WW1. Soldiers needed a place to wrestle with and express their experiences. They needed a safe space to reckon with what they had seen and sometimes, what they had done in the arena of war. They needed to hear how Rev Dr. Beverly Prestwood Taylor describes, that: “*In situations of danger, or heightened awareness of the possibility of danger, the part of the brain that oversees morality is less active.*”

In my little book, [Repairing the Soul of a Three-Legged Stool](#) I note that church community can help with this work by providing:

- Presence
- Non-Judgemental Support
- Accountability

- Opportunities for Giving back
- Rituals for healing
- An awareness of community responsibility in sending the soldier to war
- Hope

In other words, by reminding one another of today's lesson, that God's love is still on the table.

If you'll notice, Jesus does not conclude that the young scholar is already at God's side, but When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

When we can remember the Shema. When we can re-establish loving relationships with one another (sometimes long after a war or some other traumatic experience) I believe that Jesus notes, we draw closer to the realm of God. Our love of God and neighbor brings us closer. Closer to healing. Closer to knowing. Closer to God. Closer to this Communion that we've received today.

On this All Saints Sunday we recall the names of those who died of war...of illness...of accident...by their own hand...by the hands and actions of another.

Included in this list are our Jewish sisters and brothers from PA...and the people of color murdered last week in Jeffersontown, Kentucky...and the two women shot down at a yoga studio in Tallahassee, Florida.

I believe each of these people burned brightly in this life. They each strived to draw closer to God. Today we recognize that their communion is complete. Let us witness that truth in the love of our one God....