

## Détente

First Reading: Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Second Reading: Mark 12:28-34

Well, the staff here is tripping on the incense of fresh asphalt. The days of detours may soon come to an end ... perhaps. A traffic circle. Is it a jinx to say it out loud? The latest deadline may pass without fanfare, but there is a curb and a ring of asphalt. We can't deny that progress is happening.

Those of us at the back of the office hallway can feel it ... literally. I've never had the luxury of inserting a quarter at the cheap motel to test drive the magic finger mattress, though I did once sit in the showroom massage chair at Sharper Image. But now, without even leaving my desk I can feel the sensation of driving too fast on a cobblestone road. Earth movers, bulldozers, surface scrapers, backhoes, jackhammers, excavators, trenchers, cold planers, graders, asphalt pavers, compactors, drum rollers — After the work is completed will I ever again be able to dissociate sermon writing from fat jiggling? Is this what Carol King was singing about? Traffic circles? *I feel the earth move under my feet...*

Perhaps it is fitting to feel this trembling in this frighteningly tremulous season of decision. Nerves are frazzling, anxieties are amping, emotions are rollercoastering as Steve Kornacki irons his khakis, rolls up his sleeves, buys a few more dry-erase markers and steps up to the board Tuesday evening. Feels like a road grader is making a pass over your heart, doesn't it? I have to feel this is a bad season to be serving on something like a homeowner's board. The filters that preserve civility have worn away, and our existential trepidations are rising to the surface looking for an outlet. Like tirading toddlers we rage at a world that refuses to bend to our will, prune our suspicions, wean us off our doom scrolling or mute our misinformed malevolence. What were minor irritations morph into major confrontations.

Is there a poultice for our perturbation, an antidote for the simmering anger? Well, I'm so glad you asked. The children know it. They've been around the church long enough to understand that you can never go wrong here if you just answer every preacher's question by simply saying ... *Jesus*.

Today, Jesus provides us a template for how to live healthfully and wholly in a world soaked with conflict and irritability. In this section of

Mark's Gospel you can almost picture Jesus in one of those surrealistic movie scenes where the protagonist has something like an out of body experience. The chaotic, contentious chorus of cocksure sentiment surrounds him, but the cast and setting blur around and behind him as he is transported forward with increasing speed toward his destination, in this case, the cross. Just listen to a sample of the descriptive phrases employed in the chapters leading up to the text we are looking at today: *“And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching;”* — *“As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders came to him and said, ‘By what authority are you doing these things? Who gave you this authority to do them?’”* — *“When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd;”*

Chief priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees, Sadducees — Wherever two or three are gathered and the subject is Jesus there is always tension and usually the potential for conflict. That's not an easy crowd. My father once warned me not to take a pulpit in a college town, because at least half of the people entering worship are assuming they know a whole lot more than

you, and they often do. Yet, it doesn't matter where you are, whenever you are looking for something to contest, judge, find fault with ... you will find it. That's why it is never wise to go to the cinema with a movie critic. They will not just let you enjoy the movie. They can't help themselves. They are poking holes in the plot, identifying flaws in the set, criticizing the skills of the actor.

Chief priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees, Sadducees — That's a symphony of strident opinions. Everybody has a turf they are determined to protect from new ideas, political challenges, doctrinal skepticism, threats to sacred traditions, bids for power.

Chief priests, scribes, elders, Pharisees, Sadducees. Amidst the crowds who came to Jesus to listen and learn, these were the watchers, the hall monitors, the secret police, the guardians not looking to learn, not seeking inspiration, but observing to find fault, gauge the level of threat, and put down any challenge to their status quo. It was as if Jesus was simultaneously addressing two separate events, two distinct crowds, the seekers and the interrogators — illumination vs. rumination, animated hearts vs. censoring eyes.

*“One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’”* Generally, the scribes don’t get good reviews in the Gospels. They are usually thrown in with the Pharisees, high priests, and Sadducees. Thus, they are viewed as the antagonists brought together by their mutual desire to put Jesus down. However, we would be mistaken to assume they were anything like a united front. There were always differences and tensions between and among these various groups.

In fact, the scribes were not an organized party or faction at all. Their name derived more from their vocation than any affiliation. Being called a scribe meant that you could read and write, coveted tools not widely held in that time. The scribes were a part of the educated class, often possessing additional competence in economics, composition, or law.

In the Old Testament, we have the word of the Lord, as distilled by the prophet Jeremiah and recorded by his scribe, Baruch. Scribes, because of their training, were often involved in the wheels of governance and administration. To be a scribe didn’t entail being a member of a guild or

party, however, being a scribe didn't prevent one from being affiliated or just hanging around with one of the established Jewish parties.

In the New Testament, particularly in Mark, we usually see scribes hanging out with the Pharisees and the high priest, folks who would also be considered part of the educated class. As such, the scribes are usually portrayed as being hostile to Jesus. In Mark 1, describing the early ministry of Jesus, Mark says, Jesus *“taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.”* In Mark 8, it says, *“Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”* Here in Mark 12, Jesus says, *“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces.”*

Thus, the scribes, generally, were not surfing *Amazon* to order their *Jesus First* lapel pins. And yet, as with most assemblies of humans, there was a philosophical or theological diversity among the scribes. Being educated, they have already evidenced the possession of inquisitive minds. And so, set amidst an environment of increasing hostility and widening polarity, Mark interrupts the antipathy with something very different, an actual

conversation with both parties listening to understand instead of reacting to prove the other wrong.

*“One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”* This isn’t a test or a gotcha question or even a loaded question. The spirit of this encounter is in stark contrast to the other exchanges brewing around Jesus. This is an actual thoughtful conversation in pursuit of mutual understanding. It is a relational exchange that is much deeper than the typical social encounter. It’s like the difference between inquiring about what you do for a living and what meaning you derive from your vocation.

Who’d the Panthers lose to today? — That’s informational. What’s your favorite movie? — That’s personal. What is most important to you and why? — That’s relational. There is a big difference between an informational exchange and a relational encounter. There’s a significant difference between a personal inquiry and a relational conversation. What time does the game start? Information. What is your favorite team?

Personal. How did baseball provide the grist or glue for your relationship with your father? Relational.

We tend to hang out in the realm of informational exchanges, and perhaps personal opinions, but we shy away from relational conversations. Yet, we are only fooling ourselves if we think it is safer to stick with information and opinion.

*Don't want to get too deep!* I would say, more than anything, this is the illusion that has gotten our culture into so much trouble. This is the illusion that created the polarization which plagues us and threatens to destroy us. You see, if we stop at personal opinions and shy away from meaning and relation, our relationships are based on litmus tests. If you answer correctly on A, B, and C, then we can be seen together, go to the brewery together, go to church together, sing Kum Bah Ya together at the political rally. However, if you don't answer the litmus questions correctly, then we have nothing to do with one another, except maybe to blame each other. Is that what we really want? Friendships defined by mutual enemies?

How might your contacts list expand if instead of cataloging others according to their scores on your litmus tests, you actually skipped over the



litmus test and sought to understand them as a person, with a story, with a family, with hopes, with wounds, with flaws, talents, fears, and gifts?

That's what is happening here in the encounter between the scribe and Jesus. Basically, the scribe is asking Jesus what is most important to him? What drives his worldview? What shapes his approach to others? What gives his life meaning and purpose? And, amidst all the conflict, suspicion, and plotting going on around them, they discover that they are not so different after all. In fact, at the core of each other's being they discover the same four words — Love God. Love neighbor. And that, Jesus implies, is where the kingdom of God is found.

Are we nervous about what the coming weeks portend? Sure we are. But whatever befalls us after Tuesday, our priority, our purpose, our programming here remains the same — Love God. Love Neighbor. Undoubtedly, it is the hardest work we shall ever pursue, and yet, the best life we can know. Maybe the Poet William Blake was on to something — “I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see; I sought my God, but my God eluded me; I sought my neighbor, and I found all three.” Amen.