

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Freedom, Faith, Forgiveness

Mark 12:28-34

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
analysis by Ed Schroeder

Sabbatarians,

1. The Gospel appointed in the RCL for next Sunday, Pentecost 24 (November 2), is Mark 12:28-34.
2. INTERLUDE FOR LUTHERANS : Those of you who may still be anticipating a Reformation Festival sermon, the three texts for that day, taken as a triad, might be parsed like this: The Three “F” words of the Reformation (=the “F” words of the Gospel itself): Freedom, Faith, Forgiveness.

Stage 1. (John 8) *External: Living daily life as slaves, not as God’s children—in unfreedom, untruth.* **Stage 2.** (Romans 3) *Internal: Hearts hanging on the “law of works,” not on the “law [Ouch. Paul, why did you use THAT term here?!] of faith.”*

Stage 3. (Jeremiah 31) *Eternal/Infernal: Still stuck in “old covenant” linkage with God [Sinai], a covenant which they/we “always” break. Sinai offers no forgiveness of iniquity, sins get remembered. Finally “the whole world [is] held accountable to God” and “no one [gets] justified” by this old covenant.*

Stage 4. (All 3 pericopes) *New Eternal: God’s FORGIVENESS*

covenant in Jesus. God showing his righteousness in Christ Jesus. Jesus, Word of Truth, making slaves “free indeed.”

Stage 5. *(Romans) New Internal FAITH = the transfer mechanism that makes Stage 4 my own.*

Stage 6. *(John) New External: Back out into the world in FREEDOM.*

A CROSSINGS MATRIX FOR MARK 12:28-34

PROLEGOMENA

1. Mark's chapter 12 is carefully crafted as a grand finale of pre-passion encounter with Israel of his day. Chapter 13 brings Mark's apocalypse, and with 14 the passion narrative begins.
2. All Mark's major dramatis personae are here: the ochlos (12 & 37), the Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees, the scribes—one of whom is the hero (perhaps) in v. 34 of the day's Gospel, although Jesus denounces “the scribes” four verses later. The temple too is here, along with the “poor widow,” ochlos par excellence, whose minuscule offering elicits Jesus' maxi-praise. With each of the four groups of his constant critics, Jesus has one final conversation here.
3. In the first two cases the conversation begins with “them” questioning Jesus, and the interrogation is about the law. “Is it lawful” to pay taxes to Caesar? And what about the

Levirate law on marriage when you link it to the resurrection? Jesus finesses their legalist questioning with his standard ploy of turning the question's answer back upon the questioner. The second of those answers is the segue to the day's pericope.

4. Here too the questioner, this time one of the scribes, asks Jesus if he knows what the Number One commandment is. The scribe is in his accustomed "control-role," Jesus the one on the spot. Yet this time Jesus does give a straight answer, not giving an answer that becomes his challenge back to the questioner. When Jesus gets the answer right, correctly citing first the Shema, then commandment #1 and also #2, the scribe commends him, adding his own targum, that this triad "is more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."
5. For this "wise" answer from the scribe, Jesus says: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." This short sentence is Jesus' "left hook" after his first "straightforward right" answer. That puts this scribe on the spot. How near is "not far?"
6. One might say that the Pharisees, Herodians, and Sadducees with their questions about imperial taxes and Levirate marriage are trivializing God's law. Questions beginning "is it lawful" are legalists' questions. They ask "how much, how little, how far" one must act in order still to be kosher by the law's rubrics. The fundamental commandment, which the scribe here sees as THE issue, is not at all trivial. It is about the human hearts, souls, minds, strengths; about those centers of our life being "whole" in our love of the one true God. Is this the God we are "hearing?"
7. Hearing the God of the law aright is one giant step closer to the kingdom than hearing the law as rubrics for trivia. But that is still not yet to be "in" the kingdom, not yet

being an insider, a beneficiary, of God's kingdom in Jesus, God's mercy management of sinners—all of them finally outsiders, ochlos, when measured by the law's fundamental triad: first hearing, then loving God and neighbor.

8. Could it be that Jesus himself, or at least Mark, wants us to catch this left-hook, "not far from the kingdom of God," as a double entendre? Remember this scribe is standing face-to-face with Jesus. How far from the kingdom of God is he? Not miles away. Just inches.
9. There are two further signals that Mark intends chapter 12 to be his summary-review of what's happened before the passion history. One is his own concluding comment in this pericope (34c) and the three-verse pericope on the question Jesus poses "in the temple." 1: "After that no one dared to ask Jesus any question." Apparently the stand-off between Jesus and his critics is clear. In the opening episode of chapter 12 "they realized that he had told this parable against them." After one more set of questions from all the opposition parties, there are "no more questions, your honor."
10. But Jesus, and Mark as evangelist, are not yet done. Vv.35-38 move the crux question away from the law, even from the law when it is understood "wisely." The crux issue from the Hebrew scriptures is not Moses and Sinai, but the Messiah, David's son. Whatever else Jesus is doing with his riddle question about Messiah, he is signalling that it is not Torah, but Messiah, whom David himself declares to be his Lord. Strangely at first, this Messiah is initially David's son (i.e., under him, less than him), but when David calls him "Lord," David is ranking that son above him. And such ranking reversal was not David's private opinion, for the Holy Spirit moved David to such a declaration.

11. Put into salvation language, it is not the law—even when rightly understood—that is our entry into the kingdom of God, or even to keeping the law’s core commandments—all three (!) of them— “wisely.” No, as was true for David, so for us it is our link to the Messiah which links us “rightly” to God. Hearing him is fulfilling the ancient Shema, trusting this Messiah is “loving God with the whole heart...,” and it leads to knowing “rightly” the corollary neighbor-commandment.
 12. Footnote on the “Shema.” Just before we left St. Louis in August, Jim Rimbach, now OT prof. at the Luth. Seminary in Hong Kong, sent me an article by J. Gerald Janzen of Indianapolis [no further bibliograph. specs given] titled: “On the Most Important Word in the Shema (Deut. 6:4-5).” That most important word, says JGJ, is “echad,” usually rendered “one.” But not really, claims JGJ. It means “reliable,” that Israel’s God is not double-minded, talking out of both sides of the divine mouth. JGJ has texts to support this, plus this obvious (?) observation: Israel’s faith problem was never really polytheism, but whether the one God they claimed—or who had claimed them—was trustworthy, especially given the “Sturm und Drang” of their own history. So “echad” asserts that in God is no duplicity. Yahweh is reliable, and therefore your proper response is “total reliance upon that One with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”
-

A CROSSINGS MATRIX FOR MARK 12:28-34.

DIAGNOSIS:

STAGE 1 Not far from the kingdom of God—maybe even a church member, even a pastor!—and yet not near.

STAGE 2 Knowing that God's law is not about trivia, but about life and death. Knowing even the specs of that Law (as scripture expert, theology professor, for example), yet powerless with one's own scribal learning to "hear" God, to love that God with one's "whole" person, and thus also powerless with the commandment about neighbor-love.

STAGE 3 Nor far from the kingdom of God's mercy management in Christ is still not in it. The scribe ought to have asked Jesus one more question: "OK, not far. I'd like to be closer. Better yet, inside it. Tell me how." Since he did not, the kingdom did not get to him here.

A NEW PROGNOSIS:

STAGE 4 David's son, whom David too needed to be his Lord, is Jesus, the ochlos Messiah. Wherever he is, the "kingdom of God is near." What it takes for him to be David's Messiah and thereby David's Lord (=owner)—and ours too—is chronicled in Mark's final three chapters.

STAGE 5 Hearing this Messiah fulfills the ancient Shema. Such hearing is listening to the God of salvation. Calling him Lord is what faith is all about.

STAGE 6 Living in the kingdom of God, living by the Shema now fulfilled in Jesus. From such hearing (Stage 5) comes a life lived under the rubrics of the double loving: Loving God by continued trusting his Messiah; Loving the neighbor (now actually more than neighbor, but brother and sister) by concrete actions for those persons' benefit.