

“Following Jesus: 4) Getting Close to the Kingdom of God”

a sermon by

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**Text: “When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him,
‘You are not far from the kingdom of heaven.’”
(Mark 12:34)**

This past Wednesday Dr. Ron Carter, the President of Johnson C. Smith University, spoke to our group on the future of Charlotte. One of the remarkable aspects of Dr. Carter’s career was the ten years he spent as a health and school administrator in Johannesburg, South Africa. Dr. Carter was in South Africa in the critical period of time when Nelson Mandela was released from prison in 1990, and then later elected President of South Africa, thereby bringing an end to apartheid in South Africa.

In the aftermath of Mandela’s election many people thought the country would implode. There was terrible violence and killing by whites and blacks alike. Dr. Carter said that finally, both sides realized that if the country was going to survive, whites and blacks were going to have to get along.

A critical step in this reconciliation was for whites and blacks to sit down at the table and to acknowledge the destruction that had gone on by both sides. Black men had to tell white mothers and fathers that they had murdered their sons. White security guards had to also acknowledge to black families that they had killed their children as well.

As I thought about how difficult that must have been, I could not help but think to myself, “If these people can overcome the terrible situation of apartheid, then surely those of us who live in Charlotte can overcome whatever differences separate us in terms of race, religion, or economic status.

I.

Over the Sundays of Lent we have looked again at the gospel of Mark as a way of discovering what it means to follow Jesus in our own day. We have asked again the meaning of denying oneself, taking up a cross, and following Jesus.

This morning we are looking a passage in Mark's gospel in which one of the scribes asks Jesus the question: Which commandment is the first of all? (Mark 12: 28)

The question was not all that uncommon. Scribes often debated this kind of question. In fact within the rabbinic tradition of Judaism there were two similar and yet dissimilar tendencies. On the one hand, the law was ever being expanded. There were hundreds, if not thousands of laws and regulations that made up Israel's religion. But there was another tendency, which attempted to summarize the law into general summary statements.

That tendency is present in the Old Testament. The prophet Micah answered the question of "What does the Lord require of us?" by answering "to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God." (Micah 6:8) The prophet Isaiah saw service to God as a twofold affair: to do justice and to practice righteousness.

When Jesus was asked this question, he responded by two quotes from the Old Testament. The first was from Deuteronomy: "Hear, O Israel. The Lord our God is one God and 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." (Deuteronomy 6: 4) The second is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Leviticus 19:18)

And when the scribe affirmed this answer of Jesus, Jesus saw that he had answered wisely and said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Now scholars have puzzled for centuries over the answer of Jesus. Exactly how far is "not far?" To use an analogy from sports there is a huge difference between a game of horseshoes and a game of basketball. A horseshoe thrown not far from a stake can actually win a game, but a basketball that rims in and out doesn't count for anything.

II.

One thing does seem clear. On more than one occasion Jesus encountered individuals who, though close to the Kingdom of God, could not take the final step to discipleship. Mark tells us about a young man who knelt before Jesus and asked the question: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" This young man had kept the commandments all his life. But he lacked one thing. When Jesus commanded him to sell all that he owned and to give his money to the poor and then to come and follow Jesus, we read that the young man went away grieving, for he had many possessions. (Mark 10: 17-22)

Will Willimon, who is a Bishop in the United Methodist Church, once observed about this passage that of all the call stories in the Gospels, this one ends in depression, grief, and the one being called walking away from Jesus.

And the reason was not youth, it was money. This young man was worth a lot of money and he had a hard time giving it up.

That is one of the hardest things about preaching Jesus. Jesus is not infinitely pliable, congenial to our programs of human betterment, or interested in the dilemmas of the affluent. He is amazingly willing to have someone get depressed, cast into grief and walk away grieving with possessions intact rather than crank down his gospel to their limitations.

Here was a young man who was not far from the kingdom of God. He had kept the commandments all his life. But he lacked one thing. He could not give up his possessions to follow Jesus.

III.

But, this is true not only with individuals, but with churches as well. So often we come so close to the kingdom of God only to drive people away with our hypocrisy, our pettiness, and our lack of willingness to follow Jesus.

Some time ago I read an essay by Reynolds Price on his relationship to the church. Over the past years Price has written a number of explicitly theological works including *Three Gospels*, *Letter to a Man in the Fire*, and *A Serious Way of Wondering*. Over the years Price recalls a growing disconnect from the Jesus of the New Testament and the church that bears his name.

Price relates growing up during the Great Depression in Eastern North Carolina in a county that was 65 percent black. But all during his childhood and even to the time of his entering university he never heard a word mentioned in the church about racial injustice or the evils of segregation.

But it wasn't just the racial question that gave him such misgivings about the church. It was also the plight of the poor. Again the church ignored the plight of the poor. There was no word about this in the church, even though the New Testament is filled with admonitions about the church's call to ministry to the ones Jesus called "the least of these."

Karl Barth, in his *Church Dogmatics*, writes that part of the mission of the church is the development and nurture of illustrative personal examples of Christian life and faith. That is to say, that the church has to point to individuals and to say that in these individuals we see manifestation of God's grace at work.

Over these weeks in the Lenten Season we have seen a number of the individuals that Mark points to as embodying the ministry of Jesus.

There was a poor widow, who came to the Temple with only two small coins, and who gave all that she had.

There was Joseph of Arimathea. He had admired Jesus but only from a distance. But Mark tells us that after the death of Jesus, Joseph of Arimathea went to Pontius Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus in order to give Jesus a proper burial. Joseph went from being a bystander to risking his life and reputation to minister to Jesus.

There was another Joseph, the son of Jacob. He represents a person in the Old Testament who also stands before us as a person with great integrity. He had been deceived and betrayed by his brothers and sold to slavery in Egypt. At one point he was sexually propositioned by a beautiful woman, the wife of a prominent Egyptian whose name was Potiphar. But Joseph refused and ended up being placed in prison, when falsely accused of having a relationship with this particular woman.

But throughout his entire life Joseph lived a life of integrity. He lived and died with clean hands and a pure heart. He crossed the finish line without a scandal on his record. This Joseph would call each one of us to a higher standard of integrity. He was the original “zero tolerance” person when it came to deceit.

What if every business person in Charlotte today took that kind of pledge to honor God, with body, mind, soul, thought, deed, methods, and money; and that we would vow that there would be zero tolerance to excessive greed, malfeasance, or deception.

This past week I came across an article written in *Sports Illustrated* a number of years ago by Rick Reilly about John Wooden, who was the basketball coach at UCLA in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Coach Wooden’s teams won 10 NCAA championships at UCLA. The last one was won in 1975. Nobody has come with six of him. He won 88 straight games between January 30, 1971 and January 17, 1974. No one else has come close.

Reilly says that sometimes when the Madness of March gets to be too much – too many players turning professional before completing graduation, too many coaches trying to be homeys, too few coaches willing to be mentors, too many players fathering children outside of marriage – he likes to visit John Wooden.

There has never been another coach like Wooden, quiet as an April snow and square as a game of checkers. If you played for him, you played by his rules: never score without acknowledging a teammate. One word of profanity and you were through for the day. He didn’t allow dribbling behind the back or through the legs. “There’s no need,” he said. “No long hair, no facial hair. They take too long to dry, and you could catch cold leaving the gym,” he said.

That rule drove his players wild. One day Bill Walton, the All-American, showed up with a full beard. “It’s my right,” Walton said. Wooden asked him if he believed that strongly. Walton said he did. “That’s good, Bill,” said the coach. “I admire people who have strong beliefs and stick to them. I really do. We are going to miss you.” Walton shaved the beard right then and there.

There is nothing that our church and our community needs more today than people who can demonstrate the kind of integrity and principle that Jesus not only spoke of but the kind of integrity and commitment that he lived.

John Baillie in his marvelous little book, *a Dairy of Private Prayer*, has a brief prayer that says, “Lord, when you call to walk along a difficult pathway, do not allow me to deceive myself to believe that there is somehow an easy way around.

God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days. Amen!