Fellowship of Hope Mennonite Church
November 1, 2009
Mark 12, Hebrews 9; Year B[1]

Mark's Gospel, particularly as we're getting closer to the end, is filled with conflict—Jesus confronting and being confronted; Jesus being challenged and Jesus challenging. In the stories Jesus is amazingly adept at seeing and engaging—seeing through the posed questions and arguments—seeing into the hearts of those around him and engaging his questioners at the heart of the matters. When not being confronted and challenged, he's surrounded by disciples who seem to have no sight or insight into Jesus' work and ministry. They sometimes seem nearly blind, as in the interactions between Jesus and the children; and they stand in sharp contrast to Bartimaeus who jumps up to meet Jesus, seeing with clarity.

The lectionary skips Mark's 11th chapter and most of chapter 12. But a lot happens between last Sunday's story about Bartimaeus and this Sunday's account of the exchange between Jesus and the scribe. What happens gives a context for how we understand the conversation between the scribe and Jesus. Chapter 11 opens with Jesus giving his disciples instructions and sending them to fetch a colt for him. And, as we know, Jesus rides into Jerusalem on this baby horse, or donkey, an animal that until now, hasn't carried a rider. Jesus rides into Jerusalem, a messianic entrance, rides into the waving of palm branches, the spreading of cloaks, the shouting of "hosannas." "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!" What an image! What a contrast! Jesus is not riding on a king's horse and has no intention of succeeding David on a throne. What a contrast between eyes seeing and expecting an earthly king and kingdom and Jesus' eyes and sight fixed on God's reign in the Kingdom of God.

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1 This sermon is influenced and shaped by Ched Myers' *Binding the Strong Man*.

The narrative continues with increasing and sharp contrasts between the Kingdom of David and God's Kingdom. Jesus curses the fig tree, this tree that symbolizes his people Israel, cursing it because it isn't bearing fruit. He then enters the Temple and turns it upside down, literally and figuratively offending and damaging the structures and systems so much that the leaders—of David's kingdom and empire—the leaders renew their commitment to get rid of him, to kill him. The next morning Jesus and the disciples pass the now-withered fig tree. Responding to Peter's surprise, Jesus tells Peter that the mountain can be moved. The mountain surely a reference to the Temple, Jesus is assuring Peter that the Temple *can* be transformed. Jesus is teaching and assuring the disciples that the Kingdom of God *can* be lived and experienced. Transforming the Temple from the "den of robbers" that it had become to God's house of prayer is achievable, achievable if they pray for it, if they can see it, if they can believe it.

The rhythm between Jerusalem and away from Jerusalem, between Temple and away from Temple continues. Back in the Temple, Jesus is questioned about the source of his authority; of course he doesn't answer but rather poses his own question. The dismantling of the Temple continues in chapter 12 as Jesus tells the parable of the vineyard owner and his tenants, a parable that assaults and insults those in power, those who are maintaining the Temple and its systems. This is not a meek and mild Jesus. This is not a nice Mennonite Jesus! Jesus is challenging everything—the very foundation of their cult and culture, of their worship and service to God. This is not okay with them!

So they send conference and denominational leadership to question him. The Pharisees ask him about paying taxes to the emperor. Jesus' knowledge and understanding of the law is impeccable; his responses are creative and provocative; his respect for the law is

undeniable and maddening. Then the Sadducees, with a question that reduces women to legal property, question him about marriage and remarriage and the resurrection. Mark reminds us that Sadducees don't believe in the resurrection. And Jesus, with clear vision and insight, with compassion for this woman that represents all women and people without power and privilege, Jesus answers them with a directness that makes me cringe, "Isn't this the reason you're wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?" As surely as we know Scripture, they knew Scripture. But Jesus knows the Living God and would not, and will not, be stopped by the limitations of our understandings and interpretations of God's Word. Jesus' eyes are fixed on God and he answers, "And as for the dead being raised, haven't you read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? [God] is God not of the dead, but of the living; you're quite wrong."

Jesus is provoking and poking. His mission and work is the Kingdom of God. He has no patience for anyone or any system or structure that support anything less than God's will on earth as in heaven. And I don't know about you, but by about now I'm getting pretty uncomfortable. I'm a church leader; Jesus is confronting me and the likes of me. And congregations I've been part of are congregations of European-American, middle-class, educated Mennonites. The political and economic and religious systems and structures are comfortable for me. I'm at home in them, can navigate them. If Jesus were bringing his earthly ministry into Elkhart county in 2009, we can be fairly certain that I wouldn't be having nice, comfortable theological conversations. Surely we—the educated and wealthy, the ones comfortably inside the walls and systems of the church—would be at the giving and receiving end of confrontation with Jesus.

And finally, we come to our lectionary Text for today. A scribe approaches Jesus, a scribe who has heard the disputing and debating, the confronting and challenging. As readers, we're prepared for another confrontation. Jesus is confronting every other leader and expert, why wouldn't he also debate or challenge this legal authority? But the scribe seems impressed with Jesus, with Jesus' own legal expertise. And when he poses his question, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus answers him! He doesn't ask his own question but actually answers the posed question.

Now, we've heard his response so often that it's as familiar as wallpaper; we hardly notice it or its significance. The most important command, Jesus answers, is the Shema. This is no surprise to anyone. He proceeds, quoting this Deuteronomy Text from his Greek Bible, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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 the second command, the complementary command is surely unexpected, from Leviticus 19, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Because this response is so familiar to us, it's worth our while to take a look at its context. Fifteen times in Leviticus 19 we hear the refrain, "I am the LORD," the refrain of the Living God, the refrain and image that Jesus uses when responding to the Sadducees' resurrection question. Jesus quotes the end of v 18, a section of Scripture that begins in v 13 with, "You shall not defraud your neighbor"; vv 13 – 18 list prohibitions against the mistreatment of neighbors and laborers and the poor. V 18 reads, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Eternal."

From our time in history, we're used to this this pairing of first and second commands, but in Jesus' context it wasn't a typical or expected combination of laws. The first command to love God is heaven-directed; the second to love each other is earth-directed. The greatest commands are about living on earth as in heaven. Jesus ends his response to the scribe, "There is no other commandment greater than these."

The scribe listens carefully to Jesus' answer. While he respects Jesus, his question tests Jesus: does Jesus really know the law. Does Jesus deserve my respect? After hearing Jesus' answer the scribe says, perhaps somewhat patronizingly, "Well said, Teacher" and proceeds to repeat and paraphrase Jesus' answer. Just as the scribe listens carefully to Jesus, Jesus is listening carefully to the scribe and tells him that he answered thoughtfully, adding, "You are not not far from the kingdom of God." Most translations read, "When Jesus saw that he answered *wisely*." But this Greek word is unique in the Bible, its meaning isn't really about wisdom so much as about cognition and intellect. Perhaps that explains Jesus' less than enthusiastic response. Jesus doesn't invite him to follow. Nor is the scribe dropping everything to follow Jesus. The scribe is not wrong, but Jesus sees that the knowledge of God's law hasn't reached his heart or his life.

Am I like this scribe? Does my knowledge of the greatest commands reach into my heart and life? Christianity may not be following Jewish law or worshiping in temples, but what new laws and systems have we created? What new systems and doctrines and theologies have we put in place that make it difficult for the poor and the powerless to enter into our worship and service to God?

Jesus challenges us to fix our eyes and our vision on God, on the Reign of God. Not on the structures and systems we create. We necessarily create temples—our theologies and

doctrines and beliefs—to hold and express our worship of God, to hold and express our understandings of God and our relationship with God and relationship with others and with creation. We need temples, but we cannot forget that we have constructed them. Jesus had tremendous respect for the temple; he cared for the temple too much to let it be reduced to an oppressive and exclusive system. He was willing to turn it upside down because it was not bearing fruit. Our temples, like the Living God, must be dynamic structures and systems, changeable and adaptable as we grow and are formed by God and by our living and learning.

Into a time and place when people's eyes were fixed on the temple and its laws, Jesus came pointing to the Kingdom of God, opening eyes to see the Reign of God. Jesus saw that his people were worshiping and serving the temple and its systems rather than serving and worshiping God. When eyes are fixed on the temple, real people become pawns and victims of the temple system. When our eyes are fixed on our beliefs and systems that we've created, we too will unintentionally make it difficult, if not impossible, for the beggars and lepers to worship and serve with us.

Jesus may have turned the temple upside down. He may have challenged the laws and the assumptions and practices of his people. But he wasn't working *against* the systems of his day. Rather, he was working *for* the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom of God, the Living God reigns. From the beginning and eternally, the Living God is a relational God, a God who longs to be in relationship with humanity and creation; a God who longs for human beings to be in relationship with each other; a God who asks that we show our love for God by loving each other. The evidence of our love for God is found in the ways we love and care for our neighbors and the least among us.

This is a community that understands in its heart what it means to first love God and neighbors, putting into practice and living by the law of loving God and loving neighbors. Loving God and loving each other isn't something to do; it's a way of living and being in the world. Living and being with Jesus' greatest commands is about seeing and celebrating with each other that we have been created in God's image. It's about living in a way that sees the Living Christ in *each* person we encounter, seeing Christ in the encounter between people. Just as Jesus lived and engaged people and life with eyes wide open, with eyes fixed on the Living God, so we are asked to live with our eyes on the Living God, not falling asleep, not blinded by limitations and expectations of the kingdom of David. Our Temple is our faith in the Living God. Our Temple is our living and loving God and neighbor.