

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, November 1, 2009
Rev. John Tapscott

"NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM?"

Mark 10:52

"You are not far from the Kingdom of God." So Jesus said to a scribe in the Temple. These words are rather curious because they can be interpreted in several ways. In fact, Jesus may be saying to some of us here, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." Suppose Jesus were to say those words to you. How would you react to them?

Well for one thing, you should take them **in a very positive sense**. You are not far from the realm of God. Not far from that place where God is obeyed and where his will is done.

Recall the context of this saying. During the last few days in Jesus' earthly life, he was teaching in the Jerusalem temple. After several controversies with the Pharisees, a scribe came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that Jesus answered well, asked him, "Which commandment is first of all?" I think this scribe was actually Jesus' friend. For this was not a controversial question. Jesus answered with words from Deuteronomy 6:4 that all pious Jews knew and which they repeated every morning upon rising. Jesus identified this one as first among all the commandments. "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." Then Jesus added another commandment from Leviticus 19, making it nearly equal to the first. The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment greater than these." The scribe said, "You are right teacher. To love God with all one's being and to love your neighbour as yourself - this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Right there in the temple against the backdrop of burnt offerings and sacrifices, Jesus taught that the first great duty of humans is love for God and love for neighbour. And this scribe got it. So when Jesus told him, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God," he meant it in a very positive way.

Did you hear that a new Guinness World Record has been set for the world's shortest sermon? A Church of England clergyman stood up one Sunday morning, walked to the pulpit, stood there for a moment and spoke one word, "LOVE." Then he sat down. Perhaps you would like me to try and tie that record. But it's true - love is the currency in God's Kingdom. When you love you are very close to the heart of God, for God is love.

Now we all have different gifts, so our love for God expresses itself a bit differently in each of us. Some of us best express love for God through the use of our mental faculties, through study and teaching and writing, some of us through practical acts of

service, others from the heart in compassionate prayers for others, still others from the soul in passionate worship and song.

And if the first commandment is to love God with our whole being, then a close second is to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. We are to do unto the neighbour as we would have them do unto us. Do you grasp that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with your whole being, and then to love your neighbour as yourself? Are you seeking to do that? If so, then Jesus is saying to you, "You are not far from the Kingdom of God." It's a very positive affirmation.

But there's something **negative about it too**. "You are not far from the Kingdom." Jesus may be implying that you're close but not quite there. It's like saying to someone whose lottery ticket is one number away from the winning number. "You're not far from the prize."

"You are not far from the Kingdom." Why might these words have a negative slant to them? For one thing, if you think that obeying these commandments is your way of getting into the Kingdom, then you're going to miss out. For even when our hearts are in the right place, we don't quite do all that God requires. Let me ask you: Do you really love God with all your being in every moment and in all you do and say? Are you anywhere near to the ancient and modern-day Jews who recite the words of the first commandment upon rising every morning? Well, I can safely say that I fall short, way short, in loving God with all my being. In fact, our relationship with God is sometimes a little distant, so that rather than loving him we're a bit afraid of him, or we ignore him, or feel resentment towards him.

And what about loving our neighbour as ourselves? Well, sure we do, sometimes in extraordinary, sacrificial ways. But there's another side to us. There was a segment on the television program 20/20 called "Neighbours at War," showing how next door neighbours battle with one another, fighting, fussing, suing, often over trivial things, a barking dog, a noisy power tool or a bouncing basketball.

Even with good intentions, it's hard to love our neighbour as ourselves. And even our loving actions can be a bit self-centred.

One day last summer I was in line at the cashier at Shopper's Drug Mart. The long line-up was long and moving slowly. The lady in front of me finally got there. But what she was buying cost more than she had. She was partially blind and hard of hearing and didn't really get it when the cashier asked for more. But finally she began searching her purse to get the extra money, which wasn't there. She was about \$2 or \$3 short. So I opened my wallet and gave the cashier a twonie and a loonie. When woman realized what I had done, she smiled at me, said thank you, took her purchase and went on her way. A small neighbourly act of love, right? Well yes, except later I realized I did it not only to help the lady, but to finally get to the cashier after waiting for fifteen minutes. Loving our neighbour can be tinged with self-interest. So often the order of God,

neighbour and self turns into self, neighbour and God.

The truth is that in some way we all fall short in the love department. And that's why keeping the commandments, even when we do them reasonably well, leaves us just outside the boundaries of God's Kingdom. "You are not far from the Kingdom," said Jesus.

You see, you will always be just outside the Kingdom if your relationship with God is based only on keeping the commandments. Yes, love for God and neighbour is the first commandment. But what really comes first in God's Kingdom is God's love for us. God's Kingdom is first about God's love and God's mercy, not our own. If we insist on putting commandments first we may come close but we will always be just outside that realm where love is a gift and not earned. Jesus was in Jerusalem that at very moment as the gift of God's love. Soon he would offer his sinless life on the altar of the Cross as the sacrifice for our sins. By the way, Jesus was the only one who ever kept the love commandments perfectly. He is the one in whom God's Kingdom was personified; the one in whom God's will was done perfectly on earth as it is in heaven. And he took our place so that trusting in we can enter into God's Kingdom forever. God's love poured out in the crucified and risen One covers the gap and draws us into the Kingdom.

In a marathon race two runners who were close friends were leading the pack. Near the finish line, one of them seized up with cramps and couldn't finish. So the other stopped and picked him up and carried him across the finish line. It's a parable for us. None of us can make it on our own. But we have a Friend, a God-given Friend and Saviour who can carry us into God's kingdom in His arms. That brings us to the last thing.

"You are not far from the Kingdom of God." Those words can be heard as **an invitation**. "Come in to the Kingdom of God."

You don't just want to be close to the Kingdom - you want to be in it. Now the fullness of God's Kingdom lies in the future. But you can take the first step into it here and now. You can cross the line from outside the Kingdom to inside the Kingdom by a simple act of faith in Jesus Christ, by accepting him and joining his body, the church. You become part of the redeemed family of God on earth and in heaven. You are not yet perfect by any means, but you are ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, a member of God's Kingdom and sure of it.

One of the most important events in my Christian life took place when I was about 19 or 20 at a meeting of Christian students to which I had been invited. During the course of the evening an older student asked me, "Are you saved?" I mumbled something like, "I think so." Or "I hope so." "Oh," he said, "you can do better than that. You can be sure." He didn't say anymore, and I didn't ask more, because a film was about to start. But that question stayed with me, "How can I be sure that I am saved, that I belong to God's forever?"

Eventually I discovered the answer. Or perhaps the answer discovered me. You become sure through personal acceptance and profession of Jesus Christ. You can sit in the pews and hear about Jesus forever. But until you personally accept Christ's invitation to trust and follow him, you remain outside. But He is the door way to God's Kingdom. He is the way in. And when you make the commitment of faith, you receive God's assurance that you have entered into His family forever. Then you begin to really love God and love others, not just because you are commanded to do so, but because you know how much you are loved. "We love because He first loved us." Assurance of belonging to God's Kingdom comes not by looking to ourselves and how well we do on the commandments. That takes our assurance away. True assurance comes from focussing on Jesus and what he has done for you.

Look, I have made this simple. If you've been coming to church for a while and you've never made a profession of faith in Christ I invite you the two hour evening class on Wednesday. Just one class. It's a primer on faith in Christ and membership in Christ's body. If you've been thinking of joining the church, now is the time.

To some here today, Christ is saying, "You are in the Kingdom." And if he's saying that to you be thankful. To others he's saying, "You are not far from the Kingdom." If that's you consider it an invitation. You don't just want to be just hanging around the edges of the Kingdom forever. You need to come in. So make that commitment. Trust Christ. Put yourself in His arms. Let Him bring you across the line. Take your full place in his body, the church, a place that has been prepared for you.