

MISSING THE POINT

Scriptures: Mark 12:28-34; I Corinthians 13:1-3

Several years ago in a book on parenting I came across a story told by the mother of two young children. Some of you have heard me share this story before. She writes,

A few months ago, I was making several phone calls in the family room where my three-year-old daughter, Adrienne, and my five-month-old son, Nathan, were playing quietly. ... (As I was talking on the phone) I suddenly realized that the children were no longer in view. Panic stricken, I quickly hung up the phone and went looking for the pieces. Down the hall and around the corner, I found the children cheerfully playing in Adrienne's bedroom. Relieved and upset, I shouted, "Adrienne, you know you are not allowed to carry Nathan! He is too little and you could hurt him if he fell!" Startled, she answered, "I didn't, Mommy." Knowing he couldn't crawl, I suspiciously demanded, "Well, then, how did he get all the way into your room?" Confident of my approval for her obedience, she said with a smile, "I rolled him!" (James Dobson, *Parenting Isn't for Cowards*, pp. 101-102)

I think she missed the point, which in the gospel of Mark was a chronic problem of the scribes. On the back of the bulletin I have listed almost all of the references to the scribes in the gospel of Mark. The scribes, in Jesus' time, were interpreters of the Jewish law. They were a combination of teacher and lawyer. It was their job to teach the Old Testament law while interpreting how that law should be applied to specific situations.

As you will see from the references on the back, the scribes were highly antagonistic to Jesus. In every reference except one the scribes are questioning Jesus, attacking Jesus, or conspiring to kill him. Look at the second reference on the list: Mark 2:16—"When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he (Jesus) was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?'" The scribes figure that if good people associate with bad people, the badness of the bad people will rub off on them, which unfortunately is true in many cases. Don't most of you parents worry about the kinds of friends your children have? You are afraid that bad friends will rub off on them. But Jesus took the opposite view. He said we are called to be salt and light. We are the ones who are supposed to rub off on other people. It is not we who should be afraid of bad people, it is bad people who should be afraid of us, lest our honesty, sharing, sacrifice, and grace should infect them. By insisting that we avoid all contact with sinners, the scribes had missed the point.

For another example look at Mark 7:5—"So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?'" The scribes were upset that Jesus and his disciples did not observe the Jewish laws about ritual cleansing. Now obviously there is nothing wrong with washing your hands before you eat. But by making it a religious issue, the scribes were missing the point. Yes, you should wash your hands before you eat, but the real question is what are you doing with your hands? How are you getting them dirty? Are you getting them dirty by helping people or taking advantage of them? Are you using your life to show steadfast love to others or to get from them

what you want? By focusing on washing their hands instead of how they were using their hands, the scribes had missed the point.

Perhaps the best example is Mark 12:38—“As he (Jesus) taught, he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! They devour widow’s houses and for the sake of appearances say long prayers.’” The scribes made a fortune foreclosing on the houses of widows then went to church and impressed people with their generous donations to charity. Did it not occur to you, Jesus says, that what you do during the week is just as important to God as what you do on Sunday? Did it not occur to you that the way you earn your money is just as important to God as how much of it you give to charity? Don’t get me wrong, going to church is a good thing, but not if it excuses the way you live the rest of the week. Giving to charity is a good thing, but not if it excuses how you earn your money in the first place. Like Adrienne, the scribes had missed the point. And when Jesus confronts them, they plot to kill him.

Except one. In today’s reading from Mark we meet a scribe who is different. This scribe actually listens to Jesus instead of looking for reasons to reject him. Unlike all the others in Mark 12 who ask Jesus questions in order to trap him, this scribe asks Jesus a question to learn from him. He says to Jesus, “Which commandment is the first of all,” meaning which commandment forms the basis for all the others?

Jesus answers, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” That, Jesus says, is the point.

Now here is the shock. The scribe agrees with him. The scribes are mortal enemies of Jesus, but here is a scribe that says, “You know, you are right.”

Imagine if one of the candidates running for president or governor went on television and said, “You know, I think my opponent has a great idea on this issue. If I am elected I intend to consider it.” A campaign commercial like that might almost make me quit turning them off.

In essence, that is what the scribe does in our scripture reading. All the other scribes are violently opposed to Jesus. Like someone running against him for president, they put a negative spin on everything he does. Look on the back of the bulletin at Mark 3:22—“And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of demons he casts out demons.’” The scribes had a problem. How do you portray Jesus in a negative light when he heals people? How do you put a negative spin on his ability to cast out demons? They did it by implying that Jesus was in league with the demons, that he was conspiring with them to trick us. You have to admire the scribes. They would have made great campaign consultants.

But one scribe was different. One scribe actually listened to Jesus, and when Jesus says that the point of the commandments is love, the scribe admits he is right.

At the end Jesus says to the scribe, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” What he means, I think, is that the scribe is finally “getting it.” He is getting the point. The kingdom of God is not about what is legal or illegal; it is about love. That is why Jesus heals people on the Sabbath, despite the rules of the scribes against working on the Sabbath. For Jesus the point of the Sabbath is to bring God’s healing into people’s lives. That is also why Jesus associates with tax collectors and sinners. For Jesus the kingdom of God is not about separating ourselves from other people but about bringing God’s healing into their lives. It is about love.

And here is where I think Jesus has something to say to us, too. In our culture we are more likely to think like the scribes than like Jesus. We are more likely to ask what is legal than what is loving. We are more likely to ask what we can get away with than what we can give. We are more likely to seek our own advancement than to seek the kingdom of God. But as Paul says in our first scripture lesson, “If you have no love, you are nothing.”

Last spring a college softball game in Portland made the national news. You may recall seeing this story. With two runners on base, Sara Tucholsky of the Western Oregon University softball team hit the first home run of her life. She was a college senior and had never hit a home run, but with two people on base her senior year, she hit a ball over the fence. She was so excited that as she rounded first base, she missed tagging the base, so she turned back to touch it, but as she suddenly twisted around she tore something in her knee and collapsed to the ground in excruciating pain. She managed to crawl back to first base but could go no further, and the home run would have gone as a single, except for what happened next.

Because the rules prohibited anyone from her own team assisting her around the bases, Mallory Holtman, a first basemen for the other team, Central Washington University, asked the umpire if she could help. The umpire could think of no rule against it, so Holtman and Liz Wallace, the shortstop, linked arms and carried Tucholsky around the bases, gently lowering her so that her so she could touch each base as she went by. The result was a three-run homer that eventually beat Central Washington, eliminating them from the playoffs.

There are a couple of girls who haven’t missed the point. At least they did not roll Sara around the bases, like Adrienne might have done. Those two softball players got the point. In the kingdom of God it is not our achievements that will be celebrated; it is not our gold medals that will be remembered. In the kingdom of God what will be remembered and celebrated is our love—our love for God and our love for the least of those around us.

- Ken Onstot
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