

You are Not Far from the Kingdom of God

Mark 12:28-34

Ute Molitor, First Congregational UCC in Camden, November 4, 2018

The sanctuary of *Adas Yoshuron Synagogue* in Rockland was packed for the special prayer service and vigil last Monday in response to the massacre at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh. One of the leaders of the prayer service part was an older sage wearing his prayer shawl and yarmulke. He spoke of the importance of being re-rooted in the tradition at tragic times like these, connecting with countless generations who had put their trust in God in times of adversity. I think he was saying that we must remember who and whose we are. He even joked about he was now one of those old farts who had to help the younger ones return to what matters just as other elders had done before him. This was not the only occasion for humor during the service amidst the many tears.

Among the repeated recitations during both the prayer service and vigil was the *Shema*, a prayer that a Jew recites every day, as Christians might say the Lord' Prayer. "*Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one, you shall love the Lord with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.*" And just like we heard Jesus do in our passage from Mark, the leaders at Adas Yoshuron would keep adding the need to love our neighbor which is also a biblical commandment. These two commandments go hand in hand. While decrying the actions of the murderer, the members of the Synagogue kept rising above hate, resignation, bitterness in order to plant all of us back in the soil of connectivity that prospers life. This even included a passionate woman speaker who had had her Bat Mitzvah at Tree of Life and knew a number of those killed.

I experienced that night how faithful people put what they had been taught for generations into actual practice. Their witness had been forged by the fire of experience and the legacy of persecution experienced by their ancestors. There was nothing theoretical or abstract about it. My hunch is that this experiential component is also at the heart of the exchange between Jesus and the scribe. Evidently, the scribe, a theologian in his own right, has been listening in on a string of conversations between Jesus and various powerful groups within Judaism who try to entrap Jesus. When this scribe asks Jesus to name what he regards as the first commandment, he is asking a fair and genuine question for face to face dialogue among believers. The scribe is pleased with and touched by Jesus's response of reciting the *Shema*.

The *Shema* tells us that our love is and must be first grounded in God who is the very ground of our existence, gives us life and loves us. Our ability to love ourselves and our neighbor accordingly can only be sustained if it is indeed grounded in a deeper love. The scribe affirms that trusting this love and acting on it is far more important than worrying about the propriety of external religious practices and routine sacrifices. Jesus actually added on to the original version of the *Shema* by saying that we also need to love God with our minds.¹ Jesus is pleased by how this scribe uses his mind wisely. However, such an intellectual understanding can only get us so far. Therefore, Jesus says to him and to us: “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” The words matter but they must become real, experienced and integrated often through the real suffering, the real ups and downs that life entails.

Integrating what is life-giving in actual experience is also a hard and often frustrating task in the struggle to overcome addiction and the painful process of loving someone caught in it. Last Thursday, the Midcoast Recovery Coalition hosted a discussion and film screening at the library. Dr. Ira Mendel tried to anchor addiction and recovery in relationship and connectivity or the lack thereof. He shared a research project that features how a rat will behave differently when offered a choice between regular water and water laced with an opiate depending on its overall environment. A rat isolated in a cage will always go for the opiate and overdose in time. Rats living in a rat friendly environment (“rat park”) with play space, food, social and sexual mates will ignore the drugged water and live. Hence also the motto of the coalition: “A Healthy Community is Stronger than any Drug.” Ira also likes to say, “The opposite of addiction is not sobriety but connection.” Someone caught in the throes of addiction is often feeling cut off or disconnected from the experiential knowledge of being loved, valuable and connected.

We were shown several documentaries to move from theory to practice. One film featured a young mother named Brandie from Wisconsin. Brandie started using drugs during a difficult time in her late teen years. She said it took one shot of heroin and her world fell apart. She did anything to get high and block out the feelings of disconnection and emptiness. She was not the only one in her family to have been affected by drugs. Brandie began to realize that

¹ Cynthia A Jarvis in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 4, p. 262.

she could not care for her two young daughters and asked her sober mother to care for them. After three months of further drug use, Brandie “surrendered,” as she put it, and asked for help. She was placed in Meta House with other women, many of whom also had children. The first night, Brandie just cried and let out all her feelings of failure and unworthiness. An African-American counselor just held on to her and mirrored love. Thankfully, Brandie also had a family that stayed connected in a healthy way throughout the ordeal. Brandie actually made it, got a job, is dedicated to raising her daughters and remains sober. She took part in the documentary to help make sure that others know that there is a way out of addiction.

The longer feature film “Recovery Boys” followed four young men through their journey toward recovery. I will briefly focus on two of them. Jeff is from Morgantown, West Virginia. His father was killed in an accident when he was three. A short while after, his mother went to a bar and never came back. Jeff grew up with other relatives, virtually all of whom are on drugs. Some have overdosed. None have been able to keep a job. Jeff has two small daughters who are living in foster care. Both he and his wife have been in jail. When Jeff gets out, he has a chance to go to become the first resident at a new recovery house called *Jacob’s Ladder* where men live and work together on a farm and receive counseling. Jeff does well caring for the animals. He begins to stumble when he finds out that one of his daughters has been abused. All his feelings of guilt and shame and rage resurface. He barely manages to hang on but does so with the help of his newfound community. He knows existentially how close he is to using, how destructive his choices have been. Jeff “knows” that he needs to take things a day at a time, learn to love himself enough to love others, if he wants to have his children back. But feelings of shame and rage still run deep.

The graduation ceremony is filled with great emotion and many expressions of gratitude. Jeff transitions to a sober house which is still under construction with two of fellow graduates who get jobs in the coal mine. Jeff drives them. They live in an isolated setting. All three slip back into drinking and drugs. The leaders of the program have to grapple with mistakes that have been made with the process and program while also holding the men accountable. Jeff is not open to suggestions and goes into his, as the counselors call it, “Fuck it Jeff” mode. His brash demeanor only hides his shame and guilt. He moves in with his

mother-in-law who now has the children. Jeff has no job and is completely overwhelmed by the task of raising the children he loves. He uses drugs again, lands in jail again, only to be dropped off back in his hometown without resources. Jeff overdoses within a few days and barely survives. He tries Jacob's Ladder again but eventually disappears.

Ryan shows up at Jacob's ladder in his tie-dye shirt with tangled long hair looking as gaunt as a ghost. It takes several days of hell to get sober. After that, Ryan slowly immerses himself in the work of the farm. His peers embrace him and Ryan eventually becomes the heart of the group. He always has an encouraging word and manages to express both the pain and hope of the journey by singing his own songs on a cheap and slightly out of tune guitar. Upon his emotional graduation from the program, Ryan is trusted enough to live in his own apartment with regular visits from a counselor.

Ryan keeps up his newly found yoga and meditation practice, gets a dog and a job. He even goes through training to become a peer counselor at Friendship House where recovering addicts meet for mutual support. He keeps his peers focused on the present and what they can commit to today to increase their physical, spiritual and mental well-being. In time, he will even become a counselor to some of his Jacob Ladder buddies who relapsed and are getting on their feet again. Two years down the line, Ryan is still sober and serving as a peer counselor. At a cookout of Friendship House, Ryan is strumming that old guitar singing: "You reap what you sow. Sick boys die alone. He was a friend of mine." These are hard words that have arisen from experience. But just as real is Ryan's experiential knowledge of grounding himself in a deeper love, allowing it to touch him beyond his failings and dedicating his life to sharing it with others.

I think Ryan and Brandie have experienced what it can mean experientially to live in hell and what it can mean to experience the kingdom of God right here on earth. We do not have all the answers as to why they made it and Jeff did not though I have no doubt that Jeff is also fully loved by God amidst his frailty and failings. Hopefully, he is still alive out there. It can take seemingly countless times for some to live a sustained recovery and some never make it. Ryan and Brandie found the community support and neighborly love they needed and took it in. What might have happened to them without it?

We have all heard how much the opioid crisis is destroying lives and families all over the country. Four hundred and eighteen people died in Maine last year from drug overdoses, 85% from opioids.² Eight deaths were recorded in Knox county and numerous overdoses were counteracted because law enforcement officers are now equipped with the antidote Narcan. Just a few weeks ago, I was sitting in a café in a mid-coast town on my day off and I could overhear the waitress talking with some young customers right next to me. They all knew each other from high school. One of the customers had just finished a drug treatment program. The waitress spoke of her own sibling struggling to survive. They reminisced about other friends who had been through hell. I was deeply touched by how the waitress spoke genuine words of love, support, and encouragement to her customer. There are people families suffering and working hard to rise above addiction right around us. Maybe this includes some of your families and friends.

I understand that there are many different theories about what works and what doesn't in addiction treatment, including the use of substitute drugs that keep people functioning. I certainly don't pretend to have all the answers to extremely complex questions, especially for the areas of our country with high unemployment which seems to make matters worse. However, I do believe that Ira Mendel is right when he says that one central component is connection. And that is what faith and neighborly love are about whether we are facing the crime of scapegoating and killing Jews or whether we are faced with drugs and despair crippling our families and communities.

The Midcoast Recovery Coalition is currently in need of financial recovery. They are still trying to serve residents of a version of Friendship House in Rockland, a recovery house for men. At the same time, Dr. Mendel is daring to dream to create a sober house for women and their children here in Camden. The Coalition is hosting a Pancake breakfast fundraiser with the help of the Camden and West Bay Rotarians at our church this coming Saturday, November 9, from 8-10am. We have the opportunity to support this important organization through our prayers and donations and volunteer efforts if anyone feels so moved. It is risky

² <https://freepressonline.com/Content/Home/Homepage-Rotator/Article/Drug-Overdose-Deaths-in-Maine-Continue-to-Rise-78/720/57346>; 75% of users are men with an average age of 41. Many are in the fishing industry.

to let our lives be touched in this way but Jesus reminds us that loving God and our neighbor is never an abstraction. It is about being there for each other amidst our struggles, knowing we do not have to do it all alone, as the following text from the Jewish Talmud reminds us:

Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it. (www.gratefulness.org)

May we never cease to seek the experience of living in the Kingdom of God together. Amen.

FYI:

When I actually preached the sermon, I shortened the sharing about Jeff and made reference to the following poem by Robin Morgan which was on the bulletin cover:

*I have been with you
From the beginning,
Utterly simple.
I will be with you when you die,
Say what you will.
We shall never be finished.
This is possible,
A small gift, hush.*