

Extra credit: Sunday, November 5 (Mark 12:28-34)

by [Robin R Meyers](#) in the [October 25, 2000](#) issue

By the time we reach the 12th chapter of Mark, Jesus finds himself in the middle of a kind of theological cross-examination free-for-all. Priests, scribes, elders and other assorted defenders of the letter of the law are swarming all over him in a frenzy of entrapment.

First there's a question about divorce (with a follow-up from his own disciples), and nobody likes the answer. Then a question from a rich man about what he must do to inherit eternal life, and the answer is: the one thing you're not willing to do. Then the disciples squabble over seating arrangements in the kingdom while the Lord sits on death row. There Jesus stops his own parade to heal a blind man named Bartimaeus, and curses a poor little fig tree for not bearing fruit out of season.

Then the questions begin. "By what authority are you doing these things?" Read that: get the blasphemer's hook ready. Then comes the dark parable of the wicked tenants, and a question about taxes to test his citizenship. And finally, a real Mosaic brainteaser about seven brothers who do their brotherly duty by marrying each other's childless widow, only to find themselves all in heaven without a clue as to who gets to call her "my wife." With a deep sigh he says, in effect, "You just don't get it."

That's when a nameless scribe, who has been hanging out on the fringe of the crowd, and cannot but be impressed by his own stamina, moves in for the kill. His question is *the* question, the let's-get-down-to-it-and-see-if-you-bleed Torah question: Which commandment is the first of all?

Something tells me this scribe knew the answer (the *Shema*) before he asked the question. My students at the university do this all the time. They ask me questions they already know the answers to, just to hear me say it, just to have a kind of personal, extracurricular "moment." If I begin by saying, "As I said to the whole class . . .," they look at me as if I've missed the point—which indeed I have. Then it hits me—they aren't interested in the *whole* class. They want to be an audience of one.

It's almost like a form of extra credit (which I don't allow in my classes, strictly speaking, but they always ask for it). I used to think this was a form of compensation, a kind of insurance policy for a bad grade or a poor paper. Now I realize that it has much more to do with getting *attention*—trying to break through the ordinary student-teacher relationship in order to prove to me, and ultimately to themselves, that they are *not* ordinary.

You see, there are two kinds of student questions. The ones they ask *in* class, which are utilitarian in nature: "How many absences are we allowed in here, anyway?" And the kind they ask *after* class, which are invariably philosophical: "So what is your position on the death penalty anyway?" Or, "So, like, were you a hippie when you were in college?"

These are not just "questions," but indirect pleas for relationship. Some sort of validation is being sought, even if it's just a momentary reminder from an authority figure that they do indeed exist, and are not as dumb as people think. Tell me something I already know, they seem to be saying, so I will know better.

If they find the validation they are looking for, they will often compliment me for being "right on," without realizing that we have suddenly reversed roles. "Well done, good and faithful teacher, well done." When Jesus responds to the scribe, something similar may be going on. He's heard the greatest commandment before but he is astonished to see it. A routine quiz suddenly turns into something much more, a moment when a lawyer looks up from his paperwork and sees the face of God.

Stunned perhaps, and feeling undone by much more than the right answer, he compliments Jesus for being "right on" and then stammers through a paraphrase of what he has just heard. Monty Python's Jesus would say, "Duh! . . . didn't I just say that?" But Mark's Jesus sees a student who is both vulnerable and teachable—a human being who is searching, and now undone by the fact that he has addressed his question to the answer.

That's when Jesus says the one thing all of us want to hear. All of us who spend our days swimming in the fickle currents of the church, at war with things both petty and impossible—tired, sometimes, *before* the meeting begins—that we are *not far from the kingdom*.

I recently had the chance to meet Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking*, recently nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Amid the restaurant noise and

secondhand smoke, I realized that I was in the presence of a saint. I wanted to say something to her, something to indicate how important this moment was to me, but it would have come out all wrong—like a blubbery paraphrase of what she had already said. Besides, I knew the answer before I asked the question, or maybe I just couldn't figure out how to address a question to the answer.

All I knew for sure was that I felt close. Dangerously close to the kingdom.