

Worth the risk (Mark 12:28-34)

What preacher does not like to gnaw a theological bone?

by [Thomas R. Steagald](#)

October 29, 2021

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Very little about this scene surprises me. The characters are right out of central casting: chief priests, scribes, elders, Jesus, and his silent disciples.

Jesus has told a shocking parable, but the questions that follow, too, are tropes: typical theological challenges to the Galilean rabbi's authority over and against the learned and powerful teachers of Israel.

What does surprise me, though, is the summary comment at the end of the pericope: "After this, no one dared ask him any questions." Two things surprise me about that one statement.

One, that their debate with Jesus, which according to Mark started at 2:6, is apparently over. This, when rabbinic debates never really end. They can last centuries, in fact, through long generations between famous rabbis and their rabbinic schools. There is always more to examine behind or beneath any point of law—and how much more so when the debate is as to the "greatest of the commandments."

What preacher, in any tradition, does not like to gnaw a theological bone till it finally breaks to the marrow?

Of course, even for rabbis, there are what we might call Q.E.D. resolutions: “and thus spake Moses at Sinai.” Perhaps Jesus’ Mosaic answer shuts down the squabble here. My father used to say that Jesus’ wisdom—like that day in the temple when he was 12—simply muted these elders.

But that leads to the second surprising thing: that after this exchange, they no longer *dared* to ask Jesus any question.

One way to render the Greek verb *etolma* is “not worth the risk.” So, what exactly is the risk in asking Jesus questions? What is not worth the risk to engage him further?

There are other ways to translate the word and phrase: “After this they . . . lacked the courage, had no boldness, were absent the determination and conviction . . . to debate him further.”

Why? Did they fear the unlearned rabbi might make them look bad? I know that feeling all too well.

It is fetching to me to think of these learned teachers getting weak in the knees at the peasant-rabbi’s answers—and at that one answer, especially: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and strength . . . and your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus was responding to yet another scribe, who till now had been watching. But when he saw how well Jesus parried those central-casting Pharisees and Sadducees, he unsheathed a question of his own, which, to my ear and heart, seems less a test than a weary lawyer’s desire to know: *Rabbi, if you know what is the greatest of all the commandments, would you please tell me?*

Jesus answered, and the poor scribe perked up and blessed him—“You are right, teacher!”—although he amends Jesus’ answer with the Shema. No surprise, that, either. Unlike the others, this particular scribe found it absolutely worth the risk to enter the debate, to engage with Jesus, perhaps to find rest for his soul’s weariness in the common ground of scripture and tradition.

Jesus, too, perked up from his own debate-weariness and blessed the scribe in turn: “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.”

The others, now the observers, may have realized that, like many preachers, familiar as they were with the text, they were unfamiliar with the kingdom God itself.

In Jesus' answer, in fact, they may have a terrifying question put to them: *Do you, the teachers of Israel, obey as much as know these commandments? Do you yourselves love God and neighbor in this way? Or do you prefer debate?* My own sense of it is that, not wanting to answer his questions, in whatever form they came, they would no longer ask any more of their own.