

**“Not Far from the Kingdom”**  
**Mark 12:28-34**

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<sup>28</sup>One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?”

<sup>29</sup>Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup>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.’”

<sup>31</sup>The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

<sup>32</sup>Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; <sup>33</sup>and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’— this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

<sup>34</sup>When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

After that no one dared to ask him any question.

The Sermon

My sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Brill, picked up on my goofball

sense of humor and, in one of the greatest honors of my life to that point, had found a booklet the size and shape of a children's coloring book or activity book, which she bought and brought to class, called "Games You Can't Lose."

Each page featured a different game. The first one I saw was a labyrinth, where you start your pencil where it says "start," and it's a maze: you try to draw an unbroken line through a warren of misleading trails and around corners, trying to follow the one and only possible path to where it's marked "end" and you finally spill out of the puzzle.

But this was a book of games you can't lose, so the square maze in the middle of the page had, running diagonally from upper right to lower left, a two-inch wide, empty swath, with an arrow at the top saying "start" and down at the end, "end." This is how smart I was: it took me several seconds of confusion to figure out this was a joke.

On one page, there were just two big black circles, and at the top of the page it said, "Connect the dots."

A few pages later there was just one big circle right in the middle of the page, and at the top it said, "Connect the dot."<sup>i</sup>

First of all, how about a shout-out for Mrs. Brill? She handed me the book and allowed me to take it to my desk, and in seconds I was surrounded by friends whose sense of humor was as goofy as mine. We spent many memorable minutes turning pages and laughing like hyenas every time.

I should mention that over many years, Mrs. Brill had earned a reputation for not messing around; she flunked one or two kids just about every year, back in the day when if a kid got poor grades, the default person to blame wasn't the teacher. I remember with great gratitude one of my first report cards from her, which said at the bottom, in her handwriting: "*I know*"—double underlined—"I *know* Keith can make better grades."

Thank God for good teachers. Thank God for teachers.

Speaking of great teachers: I wonder if Jesus ever considered calling the disciples together—not to mention the scribes and the Pharisees—and saying, "OK, gang, it's time to start connecting the dots. And if that's too challenging, maybe just connect the dot."

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.

Connect the dot. This is not a maze; it's not even a linking of two separate things together. It's all one.

A scribe, impressed by Jesus, asked him which commandment is the first of all, and Jesus answered with two commandments presented as a unified whole—as indeed it is, or they are, in the Ten Commandments.

At the point in Mark's gospel, we have already been with Jesus on an amazing journey.

We have seen how he endorses children, with their wonder and mindfulness, and the urgency of all of us learning to let our childlike wonder inspire us to meet the very adult needs of a world torn apart by so-called grown-ups.

We have heard Jesus teach the disciples that good doesn't happen automatically, but that each of us has to choose, every moment, every day, to do the good of which we are most certainly capable, and that we were created to do.

We have seen through the eyes of James and John, the inner circle of the inner circle, how Jesus unflinchingly and unfailingly shepherded—his people, his friends, even his enemies, teaching us all that in the giving of ourselves, we find our truest life and the deepest joy.

And we watched from within the crowd just outside Jericho, as a man who had lost his sight refused to be silenced as he begged Jesus for mercy. Some tried to stifle him; some encouraged and helped him; and Jesus opened his eyes, and he followed Jesus on the way. And we in the crowd were left to consider: have I been, and will I be today, an encourager of what is possible with God, or is it more comfortable and safer for me to pretend not to hear the cries of Bartimaeus from every corner of the world.

This week, a 37-year journalist for a major national newspaper left the career he has loved to run for office in his home state. In his final message to readers as a journalist, he wrote in reflection on an adult lifetime of having gone as a correspondent into places of horror, suffering and terror. And he shared what he had learned: that “Side by side with the worst of humanity, you find

the best.” He said,

The genocide in Darfur seared me and terrified me. To cover the slaughter there, I sneaked across borders, slipped through checkpoints, ingratiated myself with mass murderers.

In Darfur, it was hard to keep from weeping as I interviewed shellshocked children who had been shot, raped or orphaned. No one could report in Darfur and not smell the evil in the air. Yet alongside the monsters, I invariably found heroes.

There were teenagers who volunteered to use their bows and arrows to protect their villages from militiamen with automatic weapons. There were aid workers, mostly local, who risked their lives to deliver assistance. And there were ordinary Sudanese like Suad Ahmed, a then-25-year-old Darfuri woman I met in one dusty refugee camp.

Suad had been out collecting firewood with her 10-year-old sister, Halima, when they saw the janjaweed, a genocidal militia, approaching on horseback.

“Run!” Suad told her sister. “You must run and escape.”

Then Suad created a diversion so the janjaweed chased her rather than Halima. They caught Suad, [and] brutally beat [and violated] her, leaving her too injured to walk.

[She] played down her heroism, [and] said that her sister’s escape made the sacrifice worth it.

“Even in a landscape of evil,” wrote Nicholas Kristof, “the most memorable people aren’t the Himmlers and Eichmanns but the Anne Franks and Raoul Wallenbergs — and Suad Ahmeds — capable of exhilarating goodness in the face of nauseating evil. They are why I left the front lines not depressed but inspired.”<sup>ii</sup>

Sometimes life seems like a maze, an imposing if not impossible warren of blind corners and false promises that only leads to dead end after dead end after dead end.

And then something comes along and opens your eyes, and for all the reality of those hopeless corners and endless traps and missteps, suddenly you can see a swath of light and openness running right through the middle of it all.

How do we connect the dots?

The Reformed Church has, for more than a century, articulated the great ends of the Church which have been true going back to the very beginning. Our purposes in what we do and who we are and what the church is—the Great Ends of the Church—are:

- the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind;
- the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God;
- the maintenance of divine worship;
- the preservation of the truth;
- the promotion of social righteousness;

- and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.<sup>iii</sup>

That's what our business is here.

That's why we have budgets and committees and staff.

It's why we pay for software and missions and small office appliances.

It's why we support people on the ground in soup kitchens and childhood learning centers, in Asheville and in the Middle East, in offices in Morganton and Louisville.

How do we connect the dots?

On October 3rd, Mari Gramling shared with us how her personal understanding of stewardship has grown, starting as an ethic of care—in her case, care for animals, care for the environment, and care for Church, all of which are interrelated.

And she told us how, in addition to hospitality, prayer, and personal formation (or “continuous conversion”), something was unlocked for her by the realization that regardless of how much one cares, it only becomes stewardship when it includes service, which is to say, love in action. She said that in her view, “When you *act* to support, manage or care for something, only then are you a steward.”

Nancy Midgette highlighted this congregation's collective and individual desire and need to respond—to the world, to all our

neighbors, to our mission and ministry partners, to urgent and immediate needs, and to God's invitation, with our resources.

John Rogers offered us a time of self-reexamination and reassessment, and a moment's pause to think seriously and specifically about our own time and talent and treasure, and what God wants with both our individual lives and our life together.

Olson Huff outlined the tangible ways that our church's resources can and do have serious, life-sustaining impact on individual human lives around the world and in our own community. People's lives are directly impacted for the better, thanks to things that our church has been able to do only because people have chosen to share what they have.

Rusty reminded us that Christian stewardship always begins with God, not us. Because of what God has done and still does for us, our gratitude makes us want to share and to be a blessing.

I don't always know whether this is about connecting the dots, or if it's all one big, unified dot that we're invited to connect with. Either way, in following Jesus on the Way, we can't lose.

The scribe said to Jesus, "You're right, Teacher; you have truly said that

'God is one, besides whom there is no other'; and  
'to love God with all the heart, and with all the understanding,  
and with all the strength,' and  
'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' —  
this is much more important  
than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices."

When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him,  
“You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

### **Litany of Stewardship Dedication**

O God,  
You have given us the capacity for gratitude.  
Reawaken within us, we pray, our senses of awe  
and joy and thankfulness,  
and teach us how to express our gratitude in all that we do.

We lift up to you our lives, our days and our moments.  
What do you want us to do,  
And what do YOU want to do, with the time you have given us?

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,  
**for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.**

We give back to you the use of our hands,  
and the tools we have at our disposal.  
We give back to you the use of our feet,  
or our wheelchairs, or the technology that can bring us  
into the homes and lives of people far away,  
even as it can bring their realities into our awareness  
and their dreams and hopes into our consciousness.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,  
**for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.**

We give you our voices.  
Help us to speak your truth in your way,  
and to be mindful of both the damage and the healing  
that our words can bring.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,  
**for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.**

We dedicate to you, and to your service,  
the resources with which you have richly blessed us:  
our financial resources,  
our mental, intellectual resources of wisdom and knowledge,  
our resources of power, on whose levers we hold enough power  
to transform the hate, greed and bitterness of this world  
into baskets of abundance, tables of equity, and peaceful streets.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,  
**for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.**

We open to you our will, our hearts,  
asking you to keep leading us;  
you know, O Lord, how easily we lost sheep can stray.

We offer for your use, our love, and our very selves.

Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory,  
**for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.**

Receive our offerings, and our commitment to you, to one  
another, and to all creation, today, this year, and always. Amen.

Keith Grogg  
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Montreat, North Carolina  
October 31, 2021

<sup>i</sup> Paul DeBoer, Herbert Kavet, Martin Riskin, *Games You Can't Lose!* (Watertown, MA: American Publishing Corp., 1977). The one copy available through Amazon this week, used, is available for \$100.

<sup>ii</sup> Nicholas Kristof, “A Farewell to Readers, With Hope” (New York Times, October 28, 2021) Opinion | A Farewell to Readers, With Hope - The New York Times (nytimes.com)

<sup>iii</sup> PC(U.S.A.) Book of Order, F-1.0304: The Great Ends of the Church