

Sermon: Pentecost 14

The Rev. Mike Wernick

August 30, 2015

Year B

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Psalm 15

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

When I used to attend Friday night services... we used a prayer book... that contained a prayer very similar to what we just heard from Deuteronomy... but this one comes from chapter six... and interestingly... the translation that's printed in that book... is drawn almost entirely from the King James Bible... it reads...

Thou shalt love the Lord thy God... with all thy heart... with all thy soul... and with all thy might... and these words... which I command thee this day... shall be upon thy heart... thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children... and shalt speak of them when thou sittest in thy house... when thou walkest by the way... when thou liest down... and when thou risest up... thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand... and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes... (*frontlets are t'filim... what Chassidic men wear on their foreheads and arms when they pray*)... thou shalt write them upon the doorposts of thy house... and upon thy gates... that ye may remember and do all My commandments... and be holy unto your God...

Beautiful language... conveying serious words... you see... after spending forty years wandering in the wilderness... Moses wanted to be sure the people understood the seriousness of what they were embarking on... God wanted to be sure the people would be loyal... and so Moses refers to the Law... that which was given on Sinai... and later expanded in Leviticus... the Law which was to guide and guard them... he refers to the Law which they must observe diligently... and make them known to their children... and one of the caveats is: *You must neither add anything to what I command you... nor take away anything from it...* we'll be back to that later...

Fast forward to the Gospel... Jesus and the disciples are eating... it's hard to imagine everything they've endured... and I think it's fair to say they know the Law... but they've eaten without washing their hands... and the Pharisees and scribes descend on them... and like The Rev. Al Sharpton... effectively say... *Nice try... Jesus... but we gotcha!*

The Pharisees are right... the Law is important... people look to the Law to guide them... and to give them an identity... but we have to ask... we have to wonder... have they begun to make the Law into an idol... Amy Howe... from Evergreen Presbyterian Church in Memphis... wrote: *When we begin to worship what gives us a sense of order or bow down to a doctrine... we cease to be faithful to our Creator...*

And we must remember that purity laws... dietary laws were very important and still inform what some Jews today will or won't eat... and we have to think that the writers of the Law were aware of some real common sense issues that most other people didn't know about... pork can contain trichinosis... shrimp are scavengers... and shellfish can harbor dangerous bacteria... and even as recently as the Civil War... battlefield doctors didn't understand bacteria and germs and how they could be transmitted...

So although there may have been some practical value in what the Pharisees were talking about... although they may have turned physical health into ritual purity... Jesus raised it all to another level... he said it's not what goes into the mouth that defiles... but what comes out of the heart... he was talking more about spiritual cleanliness and less about physical cleanliness...

And this is a real sea-change... because at least according to what Jesus says... you can eat cheese and meat together... pizza with Italian sausage... Philly cheesesteak... these are no longer deal breakers... but if you defame someone... are deceitful... slander someone... use people as sexual objects... steal... murder... if your behavior is motivated by wickedness... envy... pride... if you are foolish or lack good sense... then it's these things... which come from within a person... these are the things that defile...

And why do they defile... because they damage or break relationship... and it's all about relationship...

That's why there are some things that must be added to the Law... or taken away from it... Pastor Gibson Stroupe... who's served Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Atlanta since 1983... wrote: If a tradition is to be passed on to future generations... those generations must wrestle with the meaning of the tradition in their own time... Indeed... the tradition itself developed Midrash... a guide about *how to wrestle* with its meaning... for example... how do we interpret the meaning of the seventh commandment about adultery...

When it's given in the next chapter of Deuteronomy... it's primarily about the wives of married men... not about both spouses being sexually exclusive... in its original context it allowed married men to have sex outside marriage... as long as the female partners were not family members or the wives of other men... but over the centuries... it has come to be known as marital fidelity... and few of us today would dispute such an "addition" to the Law...

Yet on August 24... Fox17online reported that in Grand Rapids... [point down] here in Grand Rapids... there were almost 23,000 registered with Ashley Madison... a website that encourages married people to have an affair... 23,000... more people than voted in this month's mayoral election...

In politics... when we hold on so tightly to our founding documents... and insist that they mean today what they originally meant... when politicians... even after Columbine... and Sandy Hook... Ft. Hood... and Charleston... and now this week's murders of Alison Parker and Adam Ward... on live TV... when politicians refuse to enact common sense background checks for gun purchases... in spite of a broad national consensus... when they put lobbyists or any other concern above a real and pervasive current need... I think we make these documents into idols too... and we cease to be faithful to our

Creator... and when we fail to provide adequate national mental health care... I think we just add insult to injury...

And there are other social justice issues that trip us up... because we don't engage them with consistent theological... ethical... scholarly... and legal perspectives... but with apples and oranges... and we'll be dealing... for a long time... with June's Supreme Court decision on marriage equality... and the Episcopal Church's vote to include same-gender couples in the sacrament of marriage... there will be plenty of people who'll want to point to what scripture says about it... even though they or their wives would summarily reject what Deuteronomy says about adultery... as Josh Duggar did... Josh was on The Learning Channel's show 19 Kids and Counting... before it was cancelled because of his molestation scandal... and he had an Ashley Madison account too...

I don't believe that there are easy solutions to these challenges... the things Jesus asks us to do are hard... we are all works in progress... all still on the journey.. maybe really not even Christians yet... but practicing Christians...

And I'm aware of the kinds of things Jimmy Carter has been saying and doing lately... even after his cancer diagnosis... and the kinds of things all of our political candidates are saying... and I have to believe that of the two... Jimmy has more experience with Christian practice... practice that helps us look at our own hearts... and not at our neighbor's dirty hands... look at the beam in our own eye... and not just the splinter in our neighbor's...

The things Jesus asks us to do are hard... and they require some practice... Americans Spencer Stone and Alek Skarlatos... along with three other men... charged... tackled... and subdued a Moroccan national who opened fire on a train in France... but part of why they were able to act so quickly... part of why they were about to act so effectively... is that they had practiced... what they did had become second nature...

because they practiced... that's true for a lot of things... we can read about the physics of skiing... or how to shape clay on a potter's wheel... and understand it quite well... but we don't learn to ski or make pottery by taking a correspondence course... we must get out on the slopes or sit at the wheel and practice... and I'm confident the same thing is true for Christianity...

St. John Chrysostom... the first bishop of Constantinople... gave us a way to practice... offered five paths of repentance... (1) the first is the condemnation of our own sins... (2) the second is to put out of our minds the harm done us by our enemies... in order to master our anger... and to forgive our fellow servants' sins against us... then our own sins against the Lord will be forgiven us... (3) the third consists of prayer that is fervent, careful and comes from the heart... (4) the fourth is almsgiving, whose power is great and far-reaching... and (5) the fifth is living a modest, humble life... proof of this he wrote... is the tax-collector who had no good deeds to mention... but offered his humility instead... and was relieved of a heavy burden...

So I ask us to consider... what our own purity codes are... have we made idols out of something or are we more concerned with relationship... what pushes us to point fingers... and I offer all of us... the five paths from John Chrysostom... something to practice... to purify our hearts... Lord give us strength...

Mike+