

Sermon: Pentecost 15

The Rev. Mike Wernick

September 2, 2018

Year B

Song of Solomon 2:8-13

Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10

James 1:17-27

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

There's a TV commercial... about a family who goes camping... and they're out in the middle of nowhere... unloading the car... and everything's laid out on the ground... but something's wrong... and the wife is able to use her smartphone... also in the middle of nowhere... to access the security camera they have at home... to see that they left the tent... set up... in the living room... really... your living room is impassable because of the gigantic tent you'll need... and you didn't see it when you left the house... and then it begins to rain... they must not have made a list... even Santa makes a list... and checks it twice...

Sometimes... when I go on a trip... I make a packing list of what I'll need... but not merely generic categories... like clothing... shoes... toiletries... but specific things... in each category... like the blue plaid shirt and cargo shorts... like the new brown shoes and Birkenstocks... like my smartphone and charging cable... and then there are some things I don't really need but want to have *just in case*... like maybe books I'm reading or an article I'm writing... maybe my binoculars... or my walking shoes... just in case... and then when I actually pack... I can check things off...

And I think I've shared the story before... about taking flying lessons when I was sixteen... but before you could take off... there was a checklist you had to... well... check... instruments and radios... altimeter... directional gyro... magnetos... flaps... parking brake... all designed to keep you safe...

Checklists like these... make it easy... to check yourself... to ensure that you're on course... on beam... on the right path... but they almost always... point to the

external... objective... verifiable... things that you DO... that others can see... that they could videotape... like in the Gospel... wash your hands... check... wash the food from the market... check... wash the cups... pots... and bronze kettles... check... all verifiable things...

But things on checklists are rarely... if ever... are about how you've grown... how you've been formed... about how you ARE... what about honoring your mother and your father... I didn't catch that on my camera... bearing false witness... what about not coveting... did you forgive your neighbor... umm... maybe... how do we know... what about loving those who don't love you... umm... maybe... but how do we know... what about love God with all your heart... mind... and strength... umm... maybe... but how do we know...

We can say that we've done all these things... but where's the checklist... how gut-wrenchingly honest are we... and how can others verify that we've done them... when they can't see the human heart...

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... how and when... did they... and do we... in our time... make laws... traditions... amendments... into idols... Amy Howe... from Evergreen Presbyterian Church [in Memphis]... wrote... *when we begin to worship that which gives us a sense of order... or bow down to a doctrine... we cease to be faithful to our Creator...*

Richard Hooker was a faithful theologian of the Elizabethan Settlement... he was two years old when Thomas Cranmer was burned at the stake... and eleven years younger than his Queen... Elizabeth the First... who was Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn's daughter... his writings were so influential... that on any list of Anglican theologians... his name would not only be close to the top... but almost always first... and while the Episcopal Church's website... credits him with the image of the three-legged stool...

they do so in error... for although his writings alluded to a three-pronged approach to religion... he himself never used this image... but Hooker would have been emphatic... about *holding Scripture, reason, and experience in an essentially dynamic tension*... and I want to emphasize that this does not mean that Scripture... reason... and experience... have equal weight in every situation... but they must provide a dynamic tension... *with regard to the life and mission of the Church*...

So when looking at an issue that arises out of church polity... liturgy... or doctrine... *like agreeing to move away from male language for God*... as Episcopalians just did at General Convention... Hooker would look at scripture... experience... and tradition... in the light of reason...

When looking at scripture... *like the claim that Joshua and his men marched around Jericho for seven days... and blew rams horns.. and the city came tumbling down*... he would invite historical experience to inform conclusions... *like the archaeological evidence that Jericho was rubble about 800 years before Joshua was born*...

And when looking at human reason... *like the beliefs that some races are inferior to others*... he would insist that scripture be allowed to judge tradition... *like the passage in Revelation in which those from every tribe and language and people and nation are invited to the Heavenly Banquet*...

This approach allows for a check and balance which reflects the *via media*... the Middle Way... and which is reflected in the governing bodies of not only the Episcopal church... but in the American system of government...

Senator John McCain's funeral service was held yesterday at The National Cathedral... perhaps some of you watched some of it... it was an uplifting and non-partisan liturgy which reflected our higher angels... and tomorrow is Labor Day... on which we recognize and give thanks for the work of those from every language and tribe and

people and nation... who have helped form this country... but to realize the fullness of what's possible... we must move forward with God... and in love...

From Deuteronomy... in Hebrew... V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha, b'chol l'vav'cha uv'chol nafsh'cha uv'chol m'odecha... V'hayu had'varim ha-eileh asher anochi m'tzav'cha hayom al l'vavecha...

This is the beginning of a prayer we used to recite at Friday Night services... You shall love Adonai with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. Thus you shall remember to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God.

This prayer speaks to that which can't be videotaped... how do we change the human heart... how do we labor toward compassion... suffering with others... so that what we say... and what we do... rejects any of the defiling behaviors listed at the end of the Gospel... but instead reflects the powerful truth in James... that religion which is undefiled before God... is to care for orphans and widows in their distress... and to keep oneself unstained by the world...

Pastor Gibson Stroupe... who served Oakhurst Presbyterian Church in Atlanta... 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... and so we must ask ourselves... are there any traditions in this country... which have become idols...

And let's realize that the Pharisees expectation about hand-washing was not a law but merely a tradition... and are there any laws which we likewise worship... and which

keep us from being faithful to our Creator... laws which no longer serve us well... or which may now serve us badly... but which we can't seem to let go of... because of tradition...

We must reflect on our traditions and our laws... in the light of scripture... and reason... it can be a difficult thing to change the human heart... that's why every year... Jews ask God's forgiveness on Yom Kippur... Muslims observe Tawba... which means *to return*... during Lent Christians practice *metanoia*... a turning back to God... we need to be reminded... and helped... we need lots of practice... maybe we can keep a list...

Mike+