

Year B Proper 17 2018

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our God and our Redeemer.

Our scriptures today reveal the tension between a life of faith in a world dominated by human culture.

The book of James makes the claim that one of God's attributes is constancy.

"Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."

Even as the sun moves across the sky, God's shadow remains unchangeable.

As God is constant, so are the human characteristics that stand in contrast to God's commandments. None of those vices that are listed in the gospel have changed much from the first century to 21st century...they are still problems that are a part of being human.

Our Old Testament reading speaks to the uniqueness of God's commandments:

"what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this great law that I am setting before you today."

Note the reference to the nation...God's commandments are political in nature they are for all of us they are not directed to individuals.

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According to our Christian faith, our commandments, our laws are founded on God’s generous, justice and are and have always been in tension with most human institutions.

When Jesus speaks of the traditions of the elders, this is the tradition he speaks of, the tradition of God’s law based on God’s justice and generosity, God’s concern for every living being.

What is the meaning of Biblical justice? Is it the same as our cultural understanding? How do you know?

Digging in to questions like these can offer new, and exciting, ways of understanding our faith and our call. They can redirect us.

Leaving these questions unexamined can lead to false notions about the nature of biblical justice and our responsibility to our fellow humans. Our gospel today challenges the idea of living out of God’s law in direct contrast to human law.

The mission of Jesus Christ was to help us understand that biblical law, true religion means we have the responsibility to share the resources given to us by God for the common good and that it is all too easy to confuse our human understanding of what is just with God’s purposes.

From the book of James:

²⁷ Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

When there are verses left out of the lectionary, like in our gospel today, I always like to take a peek and see what was cut out...

Here is the part of the gospel left out of our lectionary:

⁹And (Jesus) continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe^[c] your own traditions! ¹⁰For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’^[d] and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’^[e]¹¹ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)— ¹²then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother. ¹³Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

Corban was a tradition in Jewish law where sacrifices were intended for the purpose of drawing near to God and to give thanks, gratitude, and love to [God](#).

Jesus uses this example to show that it is possible to use the law as a kind of loophole and excuse to neglect the care of aging parents. What Jesus encourages is an examination of human tendencies to focus on following the rules instead of looking at the big picture, of using the rules for selfish purposes and not the common good.

One of the tricky parts of living a life of faith is examining where our values and decisions about how to act come from. Our Bible is filled with scripture, stories, poetry and images that paint a full picture of God’s dream for the world and influence how we interpret our faith. But our culture is also filled with words, images, texts, films, and advertising that influence and instruct society.

These two competing systems of messaging are often at odds with one another. It takes thoughtful intentional criticism to differentiate between the two so that we can know where our thoughts and behaviors come from.

One of my favorite theologians Walter Brueggeman has devoted over 60 years of his life to the study of scripture and one of his big picture conclusions is that “the role of the church is to act out the neighbor narrative, which is an endless challenge to whatever one calls the other narrative.”

He describes the ministry of Jesus as one of contradiction with the Roman Empire, he actually says Jesus ministry from the very beginning is on “a collision course with the Roman Empire”. The Roman system of law is not compatible with God’s law. Is ours?

He illustrates this point by calling attention to the Song the Mother of God sings before the birth of Jesus to inaugurate his ministry. In the magnificat, Mary sings of the tension in the world between rich and poor, the humble and the proud, the hungry and the fed. Her song is an introduction to the tension and resistance that Jesus will face as he preaches a gospel that requires inclusiveness and love to be the top priority of life in community. A gospel that requires the political power of the community to be used for the common good. It is a song of the great reversal that the earth so desperately needed then and still needs now.

So the role of the church essentially boils down to taking care of each other and to follow Jesus in his mission to subvert the human systems of power to serve the law of God from who all power flows.

When I drive down the street and see mentally ill homeless people sitting alone, uncared for I realize that we have not chosen as a society to privilege the poor and the needy. If we pooled all of our resources, all of the gifts given to us by

God, we would have enough to care for everyone. We would. But, that's not the system we choose.

The way we have chosen to govern our lives does not privilege caring for each other as the highest goal of society. We continue to live with the same tension Jesus experienced and we are prey to the same folly as our friends the Pharisees and the disciples. Just after calling the Pharisees hypocrites, Jesus turns asks his disciples "Are you so dull? Don't you get it either?"

We are not immune. The things we do that are unholy come from the steady diet of the messages we ingest that run contrary to the love and grace and justice of God.

This is why the monastics developed something called a rule of life. To infuse their lives with a constant stream of input from their faith. To always keep their finger on the pulse of God so that they could learn to discern the difference between messages from God and messages from the secular world.

This summer at General Convention in Austin Texas, our presiding bishop Michael Curry unveiled a new rule of life for us called the Way of Love.

If you want to learn more about it, you can use your search engine and type in way of love, michael curry...you will find a whole website devoted to this new direction for the Episcopal Church.

The Way of Love is built on seven principals, turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go, rest. Bishop Curry says:

"Turn. Figure out everyday how can I turn my life like a flower turning toward the sun, to turn my life in the direction of God's love, in the direction of Jesus.

Learn. Every day, what can I learn from the word of God through reading of scripture, from reading of spiritual materials that help to train up the spirit, to wrestle with... and to live with scripture paying particular attention to those passages and teachings where we actually hear the voice of Jesus.

Pray. To spend some time every day (in prayer), it doesn't have to be long...but there are practices of prayers and different ways of prayer that can help us in that journey.

Worship. Gather in Christian community at least once a week, preferably for the Holy Eucharist if it is possible, to gather for worship as a community, where we are with other Christians and other believers and other followers of Jesus, where we can worship our God, open our lives to God and be blessed by God and each other.

Bless. To each day, make a decision, I'm going to live my life as a blessing, and at every turn in that day, every moment of decision, how can I be a blessing, in this day, in this way, in this moment. And then to...

Go. Go into the world and touch somebody's life. Go into the world and love the way Jesus loved, give the way Jesus gave, forgive the way Jesus forgives, do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with God like Jesus.

Then after turning, learning, praying, worshipping, blessing and going...

Rest. It is not an accident that the seventh day of creation in the book of Genesis is when God saw all that God had made and God rested. The soul must rest, the spirit must rest. If God rested, than who are we not to?

Turn, learn, pray, worship, bless, go, rest.

With these seven words we can immerse our lives in the faith that sustains us in a world that inundates us with a flood of messages that are in opposition to the way of love.

This is one way we can become attuned to the voice of our Good Shepherd, listening for the ways we can fill our hearts with God's good intentions and live in the way of Jesus Christ, the way of love.

Amen.

<https://www.theworkofthepeople.com/collision-course>

<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/explore-way-love>