

Series: The Words of Jesus (Private Instructions)

Today: The Pharisees and the Law

Text: Matthew 12:1-8

A Communion Meditation preached by The Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.

Sunday, February 1, 2009

First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA

We did a lot of funerals last year; a lot of funerals (over 60). Every week, sometimes two and three times a week, we were attempting to help families deal with the loss of someone they loved. When someone has died, it is natural to want to be sure of what has happened to them after death, so every week families would listen to the feelings of family about why their loved one should be accepted by God into the life that is to come. Top on the list was “*He was a good man,*” or “*she was a good woman*” which implies that our quality of goodness assure our entrance into the heavenly realm. A close runner-up was “*He/she loved everyone,*” which implies that our ultimate destination is intimately tied to the quality of our relationships.

Both of these are wonderful attributes and ones which we hope flow from a life which embraces the grace of God. However, they are not in and of themselves an assurance of our place at the heavenly banquet. That invitation is an exclusive gift of God’s grace and nothing more. As I have told you before, there is nothing you can do that will make God love you more or less than God loves you at this very moment. He demonstrated that in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The simplicity of a seven-year-old is what really touched me. His mom wrote that when they visit her parents' grave site, her boys always help water the flowers. One day they argued over who should get the water. Knowing her youngest was born one month after her father died, her elder son said, "You can't do it. You didn't even know

Grandpa." To that her youngest replied, "Oh yes I did. I was coming down when he was going up." (Source: Elsie Ratowski, Prudenville, MI. Today's Christian Woman)

What is your belief? Is there a list of rules and regulations; a list of "shoulds" and "should nots" which if kept will qualify you for heaven? You aren't alone if you think there is, but in the time I have this morning, I would like to suggest a different view of what is important in life; the view which Jesus offered to the Pharisees concerning the Law of God.

The setting for our text is a cornfield which might look a little different than our Lancaster County cornfields. In Palestine, in the time of Jesus, cornfields were laid out in long, narrow strips and the ground between the strips was a right-of-way. As Jesus and his disciples walked along this right-of-way, they became hungry, and to satisfy their hunger, they plucked a few ears of corn and were eating the kernels when they were confronted by the Pharisees for breaking the law.

Now there was nothing wrong with what they were doing. They were not stealing the corn. There was a provision in the Law which specifically stated that a hungry traveler could do exactly what the disciples were doing. Travelers were allowed to pluck ears of corn as they walked to satisfy their hunger. They were just not allowed to use anything but their hands to pluck the ears of corn. They could not use a harvesting tool.

The Pharisees were not upset that they were picking the ears of corn. They were upset that they were doing it on the Sabbath. Sabbath Law was very complicated and required that no work of any kind be done. The Pharisees could claim that picking the corn was work. Carrying the corn was work. Shucking the corn was work, and since they were doing it to eat, preparing a meal was work.

Jesus points out their narrowness. For example, by their standards, King David broke the Law when he ate the bread that only Priests were allowed to eat. By the definition of the Pharisees, priests break the law when they prepare sacrifices for worship. So it is the narrowness of the Pharisees that Jesus is confronting which gives us our take home message for today: 1) Faith is More Than Structure; 2) Mercy is the Nature of God.

Faith is More Than Structure

Last Sunday was the Annual Meeting of this congregation: its 266th. In May of this year we will celebrate our 267th anniversary, and with a history like that, it is easy to lose ourselves in what it takes to maintain ourselves as a congregation. The same is true of the PCUSA. We can get so enamored with our institutional maintenance that we forget that people rarely respond to a structure. Most of us are here because we responded to an invitation; to a relationship with a living, breathing power greater than ourselves whom we believe was revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

International pop star Bono, of the hit band U-2, has become a leader in causes of justice around the world. He is a deeply committed Christian, and a few years ago he reflected on the role of faith vs. religion: *Religion can be the enemy of God. It's often what happens when God, like Elvis, has left the building. A list of instructions where there was once conviction; dogma where once people just did it; a congregation led by a man where once they were led by the Holy Spirit. Discipline replacing discipleship.*

(Source: Michka Assayas, [Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas](#) (Riverhead Books, 2005)

There is a difference between structure which frees us to be about pursuing the call of God in our lives and one that binds us as if we were in chains. The Pharisees saw the Law as rigid and inflexible. Jesus interpreted the Law in light of its original intention: to provide a path for people to enter into a deeper relationship with God. Whenever the Law becomes a weapon to bludgeon people into submission instead of an invitation to a deeper relationship with God, we need to be very careful.

Our denomination is facing this issue right now, and at times the way we behave is nothing short of embarrassing. On Tuesday our legalism and our relationship to the Bible came to the Presbytery of Donegal for our discussion. Some of you may have seen the article in yesterday's paper about our denomination's debate about what kind of church we will be. The question before us is about how we see ourselves. Will we be a more inclusive church or will we maintain our exclusivity based upon a person's sexual orientation?

What I am about to tell you is my own opinion based upon my study of this issue and my personal life experience. It does not represent the position of the PCUSA, nor is it a position which has been adopted by our Session. It is simply what your pastor is thinking for you to use as a discussion starter for where you find yourself in relation to this issue.

It is my opinion that there are those in our church who want to use Law and structure to keep people from full participation in the life of the church because of their sexual orientation. They choose to see a person's sexual orientation either acceptable or not acceptable to God even though it is God who has created the person whom they find objectionable. However, there is a minority voice in our church, of which I am a part,

who believe that church law and structure is intended to be sure that those who are called to offices in the PCUSA are called because God has chosen them to lead the church and they are simply following God's call regardless of their sexual orientation.

This past Tuesday the issue before us was changing the language in our Constitution. The amendment would have removed language which is currently in our Book of Order which prohibits ordination based on sexual practice or orientation. It would have substituted language which I believe is more gracious which would allow us to enter into dialogue with people about their sense of call to be an Elder, Deacon, or Minister of the Word and Sacrament without the focus being on sexual orientation.

I supported the amendment, and I was in the minority of those voting at the Presbytery. The reason for my vote has support biblically and theologically, but I cannot deny the influence of my own family situation. Since 1998 my daughter, who is a gifted, talented, faithful follower of Jesus Christ and now a member of this church, has helped me to understand this issue from a different point of view. She is a bright, intelligent, well-respected member of her profession. She is a leader on the staff of the hospital where she works as a clinical social worker. She now supervises social work students, and she has made presentations of new ideas to her colleagues at social work conventions. She is the mother of two wonderful children whom she is attempting to raise as disciples of Jesus Christ through this church.

She would be a welcome addition to the Session or the Deacons of our church except for one issue. She is a lesbian in a committed relationship with her Partner, Brenda. This reason and this reason alone, is what keeps her from responding to the call

of God in her life to be a leader in any Presbyterian Church. With every fiber of my being I believe this is wrong.

This is where I believe our scripture and our Law as a church comes into conflict with one another. Law was not meant to keep people from God but to draw people to God so they can use the gifts and talents which God gave them and serve God with a heart of gladness.

Unfortunately, I am afraid that those with narrower views will win this argument in our church. It makes me sad. I am sure there are those here for whom such a decision makes them glad. We are not of one mind on this issue. The conversation continues.

Mercy is the Nature of God

The final message from Jesus in his own words is that the God he knows is a God of mercy; that it is the nature of God to demand mercy and not ritual represented in sacrifice. He quotes the prophet Hosea calling on the people to remember that more than ritual sacrifice, God wants kindness to be the order of our day. Human need, not our ritual, must be the order of the day.

I want you to be proud of this church in its effort to show mercy this week. All week long we managed to house 40 homeless men and 10 women and children on the ground floor of our church, and it was not easy. Over 150 volunteers made it happen and just coordinating those schedules was a task in itself. Then, in order to make it work, our partners in the Open Arms Day Care and the Choice Program had to work with us to adjust their schedules for the space that was being used. This morning the worship team at our 9:16 service today had to get our guests up at 6:30 a.m., give them a cup of coffee and a piece of fruit, and get them out the door. Then the worship team went to work

putting away the mattresses, airing out the building as best they could, and setting up for their worship service.

We were able to house 40 homeless men and 10 women this week in our church because the value that we held was one of mercy. Nothing was more important to us this week than being sure those folks had a warm place to sleep and the hospitality of those who were willing to serve them. Nothing was more important: not our meeting schedule; not even our worship space. Think about what it would have been like to be out in the cold on Monday and Tuesday evenings this past week with the ice and snow. Nothing was more important than mercy. Nothing ever is.

Conclusion

This is why we gather at this table every month. It reminds us that even more important than maintaining this institution is entering into the faith which this institution represents: the sacrificial love of God offered on our behalf. It reminds us that it is only by the mercy of Almighty God that we will gain entrance into the life that is to come. It will not be by our goodness. It will not be based on how many people we have loved. It will be the grace of God alone which allows us access to the heavenly banquet.