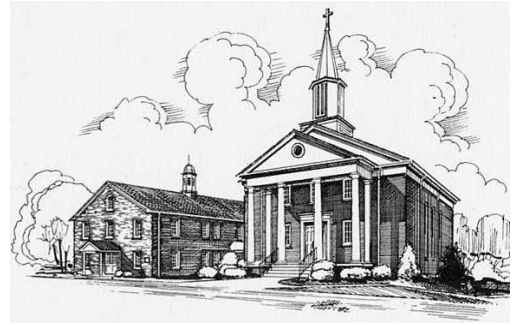


Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Year B
RCL



Deuteronomy 18:15-20
Psalm 111
1 Corinthians 8:1-13

The Collect

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, you govern all things both in heaven and on earth: Mercifully hear the supplications of your people, and in our time grant us your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Deuteronomy 18:15-20

Moses said: The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: “If I hear the voice of the LORD my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.” Then the LORD replied to me: “They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded

the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.”

Psalm 111

Confitebor tibi

1 Hallelujah!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
*

in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.

2 Great are the deeds of the LORD! *

they are studied by all who delight in them.

3 His work is full of majesty and splendor, *

and his righteousness endures for ever.

4 He makes his marvelous works to be remembered; *

the LORD is gracious and full of compassion.

5 He gives food to those who fear him; *

he is ever mindful of his covenant.

6 He has shown his people the power of his works *

in giving them the lands of the nations.

7 The works of his hands are faithfulness and justice; *

all his commandments are sure.

8 They stand fast for ever and ever, *

because they are done in truth and equity.

9 He sent redemption to his people;

he commanded his covenant for ever; *
holy and awesome is his Name.

10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; *
those who act accordingly have a good understand-
ing;
his praise endures for ever.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Now concerning food sacrificed to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge; but anyone who loves God is known by him.

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until

now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if others see you, who possess knowledge, eating in the temple of an idol, might they not, since their conscience is weak, be encouraged to the point of eating food sacrificed to idols? So by your knowledge those weak believers for whom Christ died are destroyed. But when you thus sin against members of your family, and wound their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

SERMON

One of the marks of a Christian is a life led in the loving pursuit of the good of our brothers and sisters. We saw the marks of a Christian community this week. I felt so blessed to be part of the service for Peg and I was amazed at the effortless way the service came together, the luncheon was prepared and served, and Bud was comforted and shown how valuable he is to us. Particularly at this time of the year, with the cold and bad weather, I tend to be gloomy, yet here I was, unworthy me, a part of a healing service for a man I respect immensely. That was your doing, and I thank you! To touch God's children with love is the calling of a Christian. Christians are called to reflect into God's creation the self-denying love of Christ. Inevitably, that is going to be, sooner or later, uncomfortable because the understanding of the world is that life is to be led in pursuit of

your own comfort, rather than in pursuit of the comfort of others.

In the common mind, I'm afraid, Christianity gets boiled down to something more akin to "The Art of the Deal" than to the Gospel. We are to do good stuff, oppose bad stuff politely, and providing we do that more often than we don't, we get to go to heaven when we die. A contract rather than a covenant! Worse than that, what is good stuff and what is not is left up to the opinions of the individual. Standing in opposition to this understanding are three great principles of Reformed teaching:

sola gratia (Lat. "by grace alone"). The basis for Christian salvation is solely the grace of God and not any human achievement. It is God's initiative and action which is the agent of salvation.

sola fide (Lat. "by faith alone"). Justification

of the sinner comes only to those who have faith and is not achieved through any “good works.”

sola scriptura (Lat. “Scripture alone”). The church’s authority is only the Holy Scriptures and not ecclesiastical traditions or human opinions.¹

These three principles, I’m afraid, are, in the common mind, more honored in their breach than in their observance. It’s much more pleasant to think that you can contract with God for the conditions of your retirement by your actions than it is to think that the basis for Christian salvation is solely the grace of God and not any human achievement. It’s much more convenient to think that you, by your superior qualities, can discern the good from the bad and even judge the motives of others than it is to confess that justification of the sinner comes only to those who have faith and is not achieved

1 Definitions are from the Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms, by Donald K. McKim. Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

through any “good works.”

Equally important is the role of the church. God’s covenant must be protected from dilution by human assumptions. The church is not to be ruled by the insistence of human culture. Rather, the church is to speak **its** wisdom into the world. The church is not to adopt the language of contracts and the business world into its heart, for that way lies only death and destruction. The church’s authority is only the Holy Scriptures and not ecclesiastical traditions or human opinions, and to teach otherwise is death.

Then the Lord replied to me: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable. But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to

“speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak—that prophet shall die.”

To accept the call as a Christian is to deny the pursuit of your own good, in favor of pursuit of the good of the other. Paul, writing to his church in Corinth wrote:

Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “no idol in the world really exists,” and that “there is no God but one.” ... It is not everyone, however, who has this knowledge. Since some have become so accustomed to idols until now, they still think of the food they eat as food offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. “Food will not bring us close to God.” We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. ... Therefore, if food is a cause of their falling, I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall.

I’d like to eat a steak, Paul is saying, but if I do, one of these drawn near me may misunderstand, and that

would be on me, so I will not eat steak. My commitment is to the good of my brothers and sisters, even at the cost of my own good. So long as you see your religion as a contract for your retirement – a way to get that which you wish for – rather than an obligation to live into God’s covenant, you will go astray. This commitment can be harrowing.

I know you recall the account from Exodus of Moses on the mountain, receiving the tablets of stone containing God’s covenant with the people. Yet, even while Moses was communing with God on behalf of the people, they were at the foot of the mountain making an idol. Even while the covenant was in the process of being made, Israel was in the process of flouting one of its most solemn requirements! The result was that Moss smashed the tablets and God waxed angry and said He would destroy Israel.

If I had been in Moses' sandals, I'm afraid I would have gotten all self-righteous about the sins of the people and thrown in with God, agreeing that they deserved destruction. Well, they clearly had it coming! That, however, is not what Moses did. Moses actually placed himself between God and the people and prayed a prayer of intercession for them.

Throughout the forty days and forty nights that I lay prostrate before the Lord when the Lord intended to destroy you, I prayed to the Lord and said, "Lord God, do not destroy the people who are your very own possession, whom you redeemed in your greatness, whom you brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand.

Though the people were clearly guilty of a terrible affront to God, and clearly deserving of punishment, Moses lay prostrate before the Lord and prayed for them. That is easier to say than to think about. God has brought Israel out of Egypt to be his chosen ones. He

has shown them nothing but kindness and in return they showed Him nothing but perfidy. God has promised to lead them into a new life, and they have chosen the way the world has always worked instead. If you mentioned the word “god” to any of these people, the image conjured in their minds would have, at its center, some tangible idol. That’s the way people thought, and it was all they knew. It is exactly what God was leading them away from and exactly what they could not conceive of leaving. What we like to call “the world” – the cultural assumptions that everybody carries around without thinking about them – pulls us in one direction; God pulls us in another. We think our understanding of the world is an accurate and reliable representation. God tells us “Oh, my children, no one knows what they do not know; follow me and I will lead you to wonders beyond your imagination.”

It is only when we can successfully turn our backs on the teaching of the world and embrace the teaching of Jesus that we can begin to live into our potential as God's elect. We, who are unworthy, are saved by God's grace; we who are blind are led through darkness by our faith; our way is lit by the Scriptures alone.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

What trouble we could avoid if we only could nurture the ability to see the spark of the divine in those we call enemy as clearly as we suppose we can see the sins of them. Work always for the good of your brothers and sisters, and don't get up on your high horse defining who is, and who isn't your brother.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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