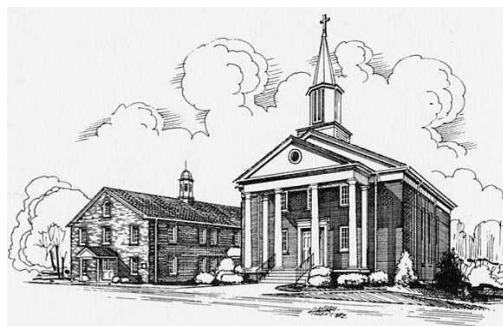


Sunday closest to August 31

Proper 17

Year B

RCL



Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Psalm 15

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

The Collect

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever and ever.

Amen.

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Moses said: So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you.

You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?

But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children.

Psalm 15

Domine, quis habitabit?

- 1 LORD, who may dwell in your tabernacle? *
 who may abide upon your holy hill?
- 2 Whoever leads a blameless life and does what is right, *
 who speaks the truth from his heart.
- 3 There is no guile upon his tongue;
 he does no evil to his friend; *
 he does not heap contempt upon his neighbor.
- 4 In his sight the wicked is rejected, *
 but he honors those who fear the LORD.
- 5 He has sworn to do no wrong *
 and does not take back his word.
- 6 He does not give his money in hope of gain, *
 nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.
- 7 Whoever does these things *
 shall never be overthrown.

James 1:17-27

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. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. 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.

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

When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

SERMON

Today, for a change, I want to talk about something I actually know something about – law. You'd think that law would be a pretty simple thing – do this, don't do that or there'll be hell to pay – but if it were that simple, it wouldn't have taken me eight years to earn a doctorate in the subject. We want to cook God's laws and the laws we mortals enforce in the same soup, but I hope to show you that there are fundamental differences between God's laws and mortal laws. These differences are critical to understand.

Let's look first at human laws – the laws we all live with. These laws are complicated because they spring from many sources and serve many purposes. Some of those purposes are wise. Some are not. Rosa Parks showed us that not all good things are legal, and the death of Markeis McGlockton in a dispute over a Florida parking spot shows us that not all legal things are good. Some laws are silly. Every office I ever held required me to swear, under oath, that I had not engaged in a duel with deadly weapons. Some laws are, frankly, just for appearance's sake. When my mother was young, her father ran the Capitol theater. It was against the law to open a theater on Sunday, but there was considerable demand among the law-abiding citizens of Ashland for shows on Sunday, so Granddad and Mom would go open the theater. Granddad would sell tickets and Mom saw to the popcorn. Shortly, the police would arrive and arrest Granddad. Mom would move to the ticket booth while the police drove Granddad to the county judge's home where he paid the fine. The police then drove him back to the Capitol, Mom returned to the popcorn and the show went on. Thus was the letter of the law honored, and the people's desire for a movie satisfied.

Underlying our human notions of justice, however, is the idea that if you disturb the law, the law is empowered to do something bad to you. Do right or suffer the consequences. That's the foundation stone upon which human law is built and we tend to worship that stone, ignoring its consequences. Twelve and a half thousand years ago, there was a tribe of hunter-gatherers who noticed that everyone who ate toadstools died. They

made note of that for the good of the tribe – “Everyone who eats of the toadstools must surely die”. One day, one of their number, a young man, found some morels and ate of them on a dare. He didn't die! They were delicious and he went to the leaders and said, “I ate of a fungus and yet I live!”

“Impossible!”, the leaders replied. “It is the law that everyone who eats of the toadstools must surely die.” And they took him out back of the camp and killed him.

There's the flaw in human law – doing a prohibited thing empowers the community to do an evil thing in return. When we speak of God's law, things are different. God's law empowers God's purposes. In our Old Testament reading, God is upfront about why He is giving His people the law – so that they might live to enter and occupy the land He is giving them.

Moses said: So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the LORD your God with which I am charging you.

God tells us through Moses that His purpose was to forge a group of run-away slaves wandering in the desert into a unified people who could move the story God decreed forward, retaining their identity as God's chosen people throughout history. They needed something to differentiate themselves from the other peoples about them, something that made it impossible for them to dilute their heritage. God gave them His law. His chosen people will be known as those who keep His commandments in furtherance of God's purposes. Unlike man's laws, God's law enables God's purposes and God's purposes are comprehensive.

When we think of “The Law” in the Old Testament, I think what comes to mind is the Ten Commandments. That's quite wrong. In the twelfth century A.D. an astonishing man called Maimonides compiled a list of the mitzvot, God's commandments. They numbered 613! The commandments God is speaking of governed every aspect of life –

who one could marry and how; what one could eat; how one was to eat it and when; even how you are to be buried. Every aspect of life from birth to death was covered by the mitzvot God gave His people to assure that they might live to enter and occupy the land God's purposes demanded that they enter and occupy. This imposing catalog of mitzvot assured that the people would be forged into God's purposes. No one was likely to be tempted to add yet more commandments to such a long list, and no foreign persons were likely to undertake such a burden. God's mitzvot set God's chosen people apart so that they may live to enter and occupy the land He was giving them. The 613 mitzvot forged the people into God's purposes that they might move the story from Egypt to the land where Jesus was to be born.

Now what? We are Christians. We read the story of Jesus in both Testaments. What becomes of the mitzvot God gave His people to forge them into His purposes once the purpose has been accomplished?

When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”

Well, of course the Pharisees and the other religious authorities were shocked! This man Jesus was making a mighty disturbance, and His disciples were spurning the mitzvot handed down eons before. But look closer. Mark doesn't refer to God's law. Now he speaks of “the tradition of the elders”!

It is tempting to worship the law, but ultimately, unwise. Rosa Parks broke the law, but began a movement of equality; Michael Drejka, after being shoved to the ground, did what the “stand your ground” law seemed to permit him to do. He shot and killed

Markeis McGlockton in a stupid dispute over a parking spot.

The Pharisees and the scribes have raised the issue of the mitzvot fairly. If God's people are those whose lives are governed by the mitzvot given by God, what business have the disciples of this man Jesus in spurning the tradition of the elders?

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

Jesus said that those same comprehensive mitzvot which forged God's people into God's purposes in the time of Moses had done their job. God's purposes have changed for now, Jesus walked among God's people. God's laws now have a new focus, but the same principle still stands behind God's word – God's laws empower God's purposes. Now, God's people must confront the deeper, darker aspects of human life. It will not be easy, church – perhaps even more difficult than 40 years in the wilderness.

Today we celebrate Holy Communion. When we take the bread and the wine, we are reminding ourselves that those who call themselves Christian have taken into themselves the body and blood of Jesus Christ. We have welded ourselves to God's purposes by taking the body and blood into our very selves. We are not called to be like other Christians. We are called to be like Christ. The celebration of Holy Communion must never be undertaken unless you are committed to living the life Christ called us to. God's law, God's purposes.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

I know many remember the TV show, Maude, and her famous line, “God'll get you for that”. That's how we view law – don't cross the man or there will be consequences. And don't cross God's law. Those consequences don't bear thinking about!

Obedience to God must mean something more than avoiding bad consequences. That makes obedience to God's purposes all about what's good for you. Nothing could be more in error. Living in accordance with God's purposes means abiding with God and His purposes as the center of your life, just as did Jesus.

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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