

The Rev. Gabriel Lawrence

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9, Psalm 15, James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23, September 1, 2024

St. Paul's Episcopal Church

September 1, 2024

I don't know about you, but I don't get the warm fuzzies after hearing this morning's readings. There are certainly weeks where we get texts that make us feel comforted or make us feel excited or proud. I don't if you are feeling what I feel this morning, but I must say I am a bit offended, a bit taken aback. We just heard Jesus say, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." It's almost as though Jesus sets up a binary here and is saying something like "you either can hold on to the things of God or the things of humans. There is no in between." Put another way in another Gospel passage, Jesus said something like "No man can serve two masters." It seems like Jesus was always setting up these dichotomies to point us toward a truth. But what is that truth he is trying to show us here? "You abandon the commandment of God and hold on to human tradition." I think to get to the truth Jesus is showing us, we might start by asking ourselves two questions: What is the commandment of God? What is the human condition?

Well, to answer these questions, I think we need to do some time traveling this morning. To answer the question "what is the commandment of God" it might be tempting to land on the obvious place in history where God's will was made known in the giving of the ten commandments to Moses on Mount Sinai. But we actually need to zoom out and go back even further- all the way back to the Garden of Eden where it all started. In James Weldon Johnson's poetic setting of the creation story, Johnson begins, "And God stepped out on space, and he looked around and said, 'I'm lonely—I'll make me a world.'" And while there might not be an obvious command in this recounting of the creation story, I think it does get to heart of God's desire for us- and that is that God desires to be in relationship with us. Even from the beginning of time, we were created to be in relationship with God.

And for a while, this worked. Until it didn't. Humans being who they are, the temptation to sin was too strong, and so the first occurrence in our tradition of human separation from God was recorded in the Garden of Eden. But God being God, forgave and continued to try to move us into relationship with God's self. Hundreds of years would pass. God would eventually govern God's people, the Israelites, through judges. And that worked for a while. Until it didn't. You see the people saw their neighboring towns and tribes with kings and temples, both arrayed in splendor, and God's people desired those things. They insisted on having those things. They wanted what everyone else had. And so God relented and appointed kings to rule God's people. And for a while, it worked. Until it didn't. And so God then sent prophets, you know the ones- Jeremiah, Isaiah, Micah, the list goes on. God sent these prophets to get the people's attention. And for a while, that worked. Until it didn't. You see, the people were offering sacrifices in the temple. They had their rituals well-practiced. And yet- and yet, their hearts were not in the right place. The prophet Micah spoke for God when he tried to draw the people back to God:

“With what shall I come before the Lord  
and bow myself before God on high?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old?  
<sup>7</sup> Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?  
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’  
<sup>8</sup> He has told you, O mortal, what is good,  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice and to love kindness  
and to walk humbly with your God?”

Then, God sent God’s own self in the person of Jesus, to continue to call us back to our original purpose- to walk with God, to be in relationship with God. We hear in Mark’s Gospel this morning Jesus saying, “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.” Jesus tells the Pharisees in today’s Gospel, “you’ve got it all wrong. Your rituals, your words, your prayers, all of it is empty and hollow unless those rituals and words and prayers come from hearts that desire to be in relationship with me.: We even hear from James this morning an encouragement that we are to be doers of the word, not merely listeners- that our faith should be practiced- that what we pray with our lips, we should live out in our lives.

If we go back to the two questions I posed for us at the beginning of my sermon, I think some answers might start to take form if we are willing to sit with our texts today and let them speak to us: First, what is the human condition? Through our time traveling today, I think it becomes clear what the human condition is: we are imperfect. No matter how much we try to do or be our best, there will be times we fail. That no matter how perfectly we offer God our praise and prayers, sometimes our lives will not align with those praises and prayers. Put simply, the human condition is this: we can’t do it on our own. We need God. And God desires to be in relationship with us.

And the second question: “What is the commandment of God?” I think the answer to this question is clear, too, and I don’t think I couldn’t put it any better than Amos did, so here are his words again: “Do justice. Love kindness. And walk humbly with your God.” Jesus would eventually go on to further define God’s commandment for us in summing up the law: “Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.” And he even told us how to do this: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, tend to the sick, visit the imprisoned. For when we do these things we do them as unto God.

We stand on a threshold today of a new program year beginning next Sunday. You may have heard that the theme for programming in our parish for the next year will be centered on the theme of discernment. We are in transition right now, and so we are discerning not only our future but also who we are now. And our texts this morning do give us two questions to guide us in the act of discerning this next year: What is God’s command? What is the human condition? Put another way for the

context in our parish, the questions might go something like: Who are we? And where is God calling us?

And here's the good news for us this morning: If we are willing to engage these questions this morning as a community, to wrestle with them and let them guide us, I think we will take another step together as a group of God's people seeking, serving, and loving together. We will go deeper in our call to be in relationship with God. We will move as a community toward where God is calling us next.

*God, be with us as we prepare to begin a new program year next week. And be with us as we embark on the important work of discernment. Guide our steps in this time. Help us see clearly your will for us. And keep us close as we journey with you. Amen.*