

REFLECTIONS FOR THE SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME ~ 12 February 2023

The Mount ~ The Residence at Littledale

Three scriptures in today's readings from the Liturgy of the Word cause us to catch our breaths, embed themselves in the depths of our hearts: "If you choose, you can keep the commandments" (Sir 15:15), "You have heard that it was said...but I say to you" (Matt 5:21, 22, 27, 28, 31, 32, 33, 34), and "Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No" (Matt 5:37).

"If you choose, you can keep the commandments" – Sirach strongly emphasizes that we have the ability to choose to keep the commandments, to act faithfully, to do good or to sin. While



God wishes us to follow the right way, we have the freedom to make other choices. The psalmist adds, "Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord. Happy are those who keep God's decrees, who seek God with their whole heart" (Ps 119:1-2). In the Gospel reading, Jesus will explore more deeply with us what making such choices entails, what walking in the way of the Lord means, what seeking God with our whole hearts means.

We need to nuance Sirach's words here with our growing awareness that not all of us have that freedom to choose which God intends us to have. Society has taken away or prevented that freedom for so many – persons who have physical or mental health challenges, persons who have been made poor, persons who are homeless or without social support, persons who are excluded because of their gender or colour or abilities or birthplace or age, persons who are living in places of extreme violence or war, persons who are living in places endangered because of the climate emergency. Part of God's invitation is that we choose to create a world of justice, peace, and healing. In her artwork entitled "[The Dinner Party](#)," the American poet, Judy Chicago, describes how that world would look (*The Merger Poem*):

And then all that has divided us will merge
And then compassion will be wedded to power
And then softness will come
 to a world that is harsh and unkind
And then both men and women will be gentle
And then both women and men will be strong
And then no person will be subject to another's will
And then all will be rich and free and varied
And then the greed of some will give way
 to the needs of many
And then all will share equally in the Earth's abundance
And then all will care for the sick and the weak and the old
And then all will nourish the young
And then all will cherish life's creatures
And then all will live in harmony with each other and the Earth
And then everywhere will be called Eden once again

"You have heard that it was said...but I say to you" – in Matthew 25, often named the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus proclaims the eight beatitudes followed by the passage we read in the Liturgy

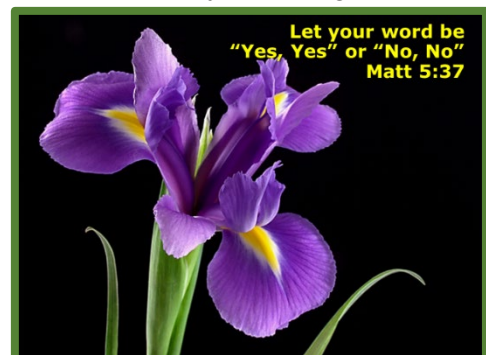


today, examples of ways in which the law and the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures are fulfilled, ways of righteousness. Veronica Lawson rsm summarizes them well, “In a series of cascading sentences, Jesus presents a charter for reconciliation and forgiveness. He reminds his audience that true worship demands a forgiving heart expressed in action. . . any form of sexual depravity is destructive of right relationship. . . Righteousness calls for honesty and transparency in every day dealings.” We not only follow the laws and decrees of our God but, in doing so, we “seek God with our whole heart.”

Thank heavens, most of us would never be guilty of murder, but Jesus asks if the same is true of holding anger in our hearts for those closest to us. Most will not commit adultery, but do we lust for what we should not have? Most of us will never make false oaths, but do we make false promises? Jesus reinforces the Torah, the law of God, as a way of life marked by reconciliation, forgiveness, healing, fidelity, and integrity. Not only are we called to live this way of life, but Jesus reminds us that others see how we live this way – if others see our reconciling, forgiving, and faithful ways, they too will be encouraged to live these ways, and we will be called great in the kin-dom of heaven. In his prayer-poem, “But I say to you...,” Steve Garnaas-Holmes summarizes Jesus’ words so poignantly:

Jesus takes the law up a notch—
or, really, down: down into the depths:
not just what you do but why,
who you are in the world.
To not merely avoid murder,
or even anger, but to truly honor people.
To place your relationship with God
in your relationship with others.
To not merely avoid adultery or even lust
but to truly be faithful with another person.
To not merely avoid over-grand promises
but to be a person of profound integrity.
This is the grace of God, after all, toward you,
who has vowed to love, honor and cherish you.
Let the grace well up from within,
for the true law of God is pure joy.

Let your word be “Yes, Yes” or “No, No” – Jesus’ last words in today’s passage focus on integrity. Say “yes” if you mean “yes.” Say “no” if you mean “no.” How simple and easy this sounds, but how challenging it is in our everyday, ordinary living! We are tempted to say what people want to hear. We do not want to disappoint or upset our family members or loved ones. We are afraid that we will sound naïve or uncertain. We do not want to cause a fuss or be seen as an outsider. We learn to speak without being really clear, to be silent when we should speak, to find ways to get around having to give voice to something that others will find unpleasant.



In calling us to say “yes” if we mean “yes” and “no” if we mean “no,” Jesus does not invite us to be arrogant or self-righteous or controlling or presenting “my” truth as the only truth. Rather Jesus invites us to do what the psalmist pleads with us to do – walk in the way of our God, seek God with all our hearts. Speaking with integrity means speaking from the wisdom that comes from living in right relationship with each other, with ourselves, with Earth, with our God. As Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians, it means speaking from wisdom that “is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age,” but it is “God’s wisdom, secret and hidden” (1 Cor 2:6-7). Such wisdom is shaped over time as we live the reconciliation, forgiveness, and fidelity that Jesus describes earlier in the passage. Such wisdom leads to the world of inclusion that Judy Chicago describes.

The Presbyterian minister, Thom Shuman, gives us a touching prayer-poem on making choices:

Mothering God,
you nurse us with the milk of blessing and joy,
so we may grow in faith to feast on grace and hope.
You plow the fields of our hearts,
planting the seeds of love,
so we may be your people.
We hold fast to you, God of Choices.

You provide the road made
for our journey, so we will not wander
down blame’s alleys.
When we choose sides by our quarreling and cliques,
you reconcile us to each other
with your words which are true.
We hold fast to you, Jesus of Reconciliation.

Blessed with the fresh breeze of your presence and
power,
we will continue to follow you,
trusting that you will lead us into making the right choices
as the disciples of Jesus.
We hold fast to you, Transforming Spirit.

God in Community, Holy in One.

This week let us take time to reflect on holding fast to our God of Choices, to Jesus of Reconciliation, to the Transforming Spirit, to our God in Community, Holy in One. May we grow in the wisdom that finds its expression in reconciliation, forgiveness, healing, fidelity, and integrity. May we grow in the wisdom that finds its expression in a more just, more peaceful, and more inclusive world. May we hold fast to you, God of Choices.

