

Sermon: Rules, Rules, and More Rules

7/5/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

“This isn’t what I wanted,” the bride-to-be exclaims. “What I wanted was a small wedding, with just our closest friends and family. I wanted it to be intimate, outdoors with the sun setting in the background, and an acoustic guitar playing as I walked down the aisle. No, this isn’t what I wanted. I didn’t want to invite hundreds of people I barely know, stress over seating charts and flower arrangements, or worry about whether we will have enough chicken or steak. No, this isn’t what I wanted.”

I imagine that we have all seen this scene in a television show or movie, where the bride looks out on her wedding day and realizes just how different it is than what she always wanted. And I imagine that we can also think of times in our own lives when we have felt the same. Times when we look back at the unexpected twists and turns, and wonder how we got where we are today. In today’s Gospel lesson, we hear God expressing a similar emotion.

God gave the Israelites just Ten Commandments to follow. Ten Commandments that could be summed up in one sentence, which we heard in our Old Testament lesson last Sunday: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5). That was what God had required of the Israelites. But as time went on, things changed. Gradually, rule after rule was added, until the Israelites had 613 more; 248 positive ones and 365 negative ones, enough “thou shalt nots” for every day of the calendar year. Now, the intention of these rules was to help the Israelites follow God’s law. As Jesus soon realized, though, they were in fact leading the Israelites astray.

“But to what will I compare this generation,” Jesus bemoans in today’s Gospel reading. “They have laws for cooking and eating, laws for marrying and burying, laws for working and resting, laws for women and laws for men. They have laws governing every aspect of their lives, laws that they have become so married to that they fail to see what God is doing right in front of them. Because of their laws, they were so obsessed with what John the Baptist was wearing and eating that they failed to hear the message he was preaching; a message of repentance and that the kingdom of heaven has come near. If not for all their rules,” Jesus went on, “they never would have been so childish. They never would have sat around and convinced themselves that John must be possessed by a demon. And upon seeing all that I have said and done, they never would have accused me of being a glutton or a drunkard. Instead, they would have recognized who I am and why I was sent, and their faith in me, their Lord and Savior, would be witnessed in their deeds.”

No, God did not desire all these rules. God did not desire for the Israelites to make following God so complicated. What God wanted was for them to return back to how things were always supposed to be. God wanted for the Israelites to recommit themselves to loving God with their entire heart, soul, and might; love which they would witness to each other and the world in their thoughts, words, and deeds. That was the message that Jesus was preaching that day. He was offering them the opportunity to come to him and let go of the weight of all those rules, so that they might finally find rest in him.

If Jesus were here today, speaking to us, I wonder if he would offer us the same message. True, we may not have 613 commandments governing our lives, but we do have rules. Rules that govern what we should say, think, and do. Rules like how often we should go to church, with whom we should surround ourselves, how frequently we should read the Bible and pray, what

words we can and cannot use, and how we should spend our money. We have so many rules that trying to follow them all can be exhausting, but we follow them because they are the wise thing to do. The wise thing to do, just like the Israelites thought they were doing the wise thing so long ago. But the good news was hidden from them, and if we are not careful, if we do not take Jesus' words to heart, it will be hidden from us as well. Because, as we heard in today's Gospel lesson, it is children, not the wise and the intelligent, to whom these truths are revealed.

So why children, you might ask? Well, we are not explicitly told. Jesus does, though, give us a few hints throughout the Gospels. Like how children are vulnerable. Children are weaker, less sophisticated, less shrewd, and less well-connected than most adults. Now, this does not make them innocent. Just think back to when you were growing up, or, in my case, when your five-year-old son, frustrated over everything that the pandemic has taken from him, does something mean to his younger brother. No, children are not innocent, but they are far more likely to suffer at the hands of others. Before everything changed just a few months ago, children accounted for nearly forty percent of everyone living in poverty in the United States, or roughly one out of every six. I wonder how many more are living in poverty today, vulnerable, without the ability to find their next meal or put a roof over their head?

Yes, children are vulnerable, and that is likely part of the reason why God reveals the good news to people them. Because vulnerability helps us recognize that we cannot do everything on our own. The vulnerable know that they need others, just like we all need God, and no amount of wisdom or intelligence can change that fact: that everything we are and have is a gift from God. Children are vulnerable, and we as Christians need to be vulnerable too.

Another reason why God reveals the good news to children? Because they are largely ignored. As the father of two young children, I recognize that people spend a lot of time thinking

about children. What they eat, what they wear, what they watch on television, how much money should be spent on their education, and what programs should be offered in churches and our communities. We spend a lot of time thinking about them. But do we ever actually consider that they don't just say the darndest things? I think back to how many times I have disregarded what Thane has said because I was busy, or tired, or convinced that I knew better. But what if children actually know something that we adults don't? What if there was something that Thane could have taught me that I have refused to hear? Something about trust and faith, right and wrong, trains and television shows, and being vulnerable and ignored?

God reveals the good news to children, to those among us who are vulnerable and ignored, because no one is wasted, inferior, unimportant, or of no account. We are all valuable in God's eyes, which is why Jesus offers each of us rest. What do you need rest from today? For some of us, it may be from years of being vulnerable and ignored. That is what those protesting against racial inequality are seeking, and what Jesus desires to give them; rest from the burden that they and other racial minorities have had to endure for generations. For others, it may be from years of striving after the American dream. Day after day, week after week, all dedicated towards having more, no matter the sacrifice, risk, or amount of work required. When what Jesus offers us is not more money or a larger house, but a new heart born out of God's love for us and our love for God. And then there are those among us who have dedicated our lives to following all the rules. If we can just follow them perfectly, we say to ourselves, then all of our fears and doubts will melt away and we will finally find rest.

Except that we are not God. We are not perfect, and we don't have to be. What we need to be are children, children of God, people who are willing to let go of all the heavy and wearisome yokes that have been placed on our lives. We need to let them go, so that we might

finally find rest; rest in God, whose call has and ever will be the same: that we love God with all our heart, soul, and might, and our neighbor as ourselves. This call may seem daunting, but as we heard in today's Gospel lesson, with God's grace, we will find that it is easy and light. Amen.