

Sermon: B Proper 17
St. Augustines-in-the-Woods
30 August 2015
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Mark 7:1-8,14-15,21-23
James 1:17-27
Deuteronomy 4:1-2,6-9
Psalm 15

Years ago I was teaching a class in Biblical Studies at one of our Episcopal Schools. The students, all high school seniors, were taking turns reading aloud Mark's gospel. When we got to the seventh chapter, the student read what is today's gospel passage carefully, paused, and then said "Was this Jesus on a bad day?" Everybody laughed of course!

Jesus comes across in this passage as very annoyed with the Pharisees who are criticizing the disciples for not washing their hands before eating, a common health practice they hold to be a commandment from God. Jesus calls them hypocrites for claiming human health standards to be God's rules, punishable, of course by them, the Temple enforcers. Then Jesus starts in on the crowd for not understanding what he had been doing and saying about the Jewish law all during his public ministry. They got it all wrong--mistook the Law for the Kingdom. He ends with the admonition that people are defiled, dirtied, by what they themselves do and say, not what others do to them, and then adds the excruciating list of sins we just heard--stuff we do to ourselves and to each other. Not what I'd hoped today's Gospel would be--my first Sunday preaching at St. Augustine's in the Woods!

The Law question is complex, but it leads to Jesus' real point, the reign of God. We all know the 10 Commandments were given by God so people would know to put God first and know how to live well with each other. "Love God with all your heart and soul and mind and love your neighbor as your self." That Summary of the Law is what drives Jesus' criticisms in this text, because the Pharisees and others put the other 683 Old Testament commandments on a par with the Summary, or even over it.

The other commandments came from a number of sources, ancient codes, lists of prohibitions, that have to do with all sorts of things from preparing food to keeping the sabbath to ritual bathing to harvesting crops--nearly everything in Jewish life. Think "kosher." In the hands of the Temple leadership the codes gained importance as they became the way the Israelites set themselves apart from other people, the way they kept themselves pure from being defiled by association with people unlike themselves--Jesus' harsh

point here about defilement not coming from outside a person. Thus, in Jesus' view, associating with a Samaritan would not defile a Jew, but hating one in order to keep oneself pure would defile--a position as contrary to Jewish tradition as imaginable in Jesus' time.

Keeping the Law, even the God-given commandments, was challenging then, as now. How did "thou shalt not kill" hold up against the conquest of Canaan by the Israelites (without a Just War Theory)? In the part of the text left out of our Gospel reading today Jesus is furious with those who believed that you didn't have to Honor your father and your mother if they came to you begging for money for food if you had already promised those funds to the Temple! Would we do that--starve our parents because we give to the church? I certainly hope not! Some small part of a code had become more important than following the commandment to do the right thing for one's parents. No wonder Jesus was angry.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus challenged misuse and misinterpretation of Hebrew Law by breaking rules that were not in concert with Loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself: He healed on the Sabbath, touched lepers, conversed publicly with women and Samaritans, and got mad about any excuse based on the Law that the Pharisees or anyone else put in place of worshipping God and helping your neighbor, who was ANY person in need.

Why did Jesus pound on this so? Because his real purpose was to teach people about a different way of doing things, a new and fresher reality that would give life to human relationships, not death-dealing legalism. His goal was to plant in his followers a vision he called the Kingdom of God. In God's kingdom, also translated as "the reign of God" the Commandments of God give direction, but the emphasis is on loving others the way God loves and on doing one's best for them, a way of being in the world that requires honesty, a deep regard for oneself and for others, and the willingness to act on another's behalf, even at one's own expense. The reign of God is a radically different vision from the one Jesus encountered with the Pharisees and crowd that day and, sadly, radically different from the way we often experience life, as well.

On this anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, I'd like to share a few thoughts with you with this text from Mark in mind. First, it does not fit God's character to punish people with weather events! You may laugh, but a Pharisee from north Mississippi, speaking for God as Pharisees often do, told a parishioner of mine that God had sent Hurricane Katrina to clobber New Orleans because we

were such a sinful city! Quick to respond, he replied, “Well, if that is the case, why did both seminaries flood (the Catholic and Baptist) and not Bourbon Street?”

Secondly, Katrina was a terrible storm, but human greed and dishonesty turned it into a disaster for the City of New Orleans. There are serious issues of legal, ethical, and ecological significance that are still not resolved. The way we use and abuse laws, bending them to economic advantage at the expense of the common good is central to this problem. In the face of such greed, loving God and loving one’s neighbor seem far, far away; the reign of God a distant dream. People today are surely among those that Jesus challenged on that day long ago.

But then something surprising comes along and you know that the Kingdom of God is somehow breaking in, despite greed and dishonesty. Grace happens! And like much grace, compassionate humanity is the conduit.

In December following Katrina, the first volunteers began to come into New Orleans. We at St. Andrew’s quickly volunteered our new parish house to house whomever wanted to come. We offered 35 beds and a large kitchen and plenty of places to meet and eat and rest. In the course of the next five years we housed over 1200 volunteers from all over the Episcopal Church and many college groups as well. It was a transforming experience for many of those volunteers; the stories they told me about what they learned about sheet rock and about themselves were simply wonderful!

In truth, it was also transforming for us in New Orleans. What those volunteers did was to provide a depth of human kindness that was truly a glimpse of the reign of God to all of us who were slogging it out with insurance companies, trying to put enough back together to go on. Here came HOPE in the form of new, energetic, caring people, at their own expense, whose only motive was to help rebuild our City. I can tell you that New Orleans would be NOWHERE today without your help and we had such fun with you, too. St. Andrew’s paired with St. Andrew’s in Seattle a group that came often and did so much. Some of us are bonded still.

So I thank all of you here for your prayers and many of you for coming to Louisiana. You brought light into our darkened world. You reminded us that God’s grace endures. You were the hands and feet of Jesus in our midst. You got it absolutely right.

