

**A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole**  
**The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Sunday, August 25, 2019**

Isaiah 58:9b-14  
Psalm 103:1-8  
Hebrews 12:18-29  
Luke 13:10-17

Setting rules around behavior in Churches is always difficult. The basic Christian desire to be welcoming and open to everyone makes it hard for us to make rules and uphold them. Humor can help. I liked this translation of a notice that is apparently going up in several French churches at the moment,

"It is possible that as you enter this church you will hear God's call

"However, it is unlikely that he will contact you by phone

"Please turn off your phones

"If you want to talk to God, come in, choose a quiet place and talk to him, if you want to see him, send a text message while driving..."

I have raised the specter of reality TV from this pulpit before I know.

Classics like the series my daughter found called 'Catfish', where poor souls are duped and generally fall in love with someone online that is

nothing like the pictures they have been sent. Like the poor girl who fell in love with what she thought was a blond-haired Adonis of a man from California, but who in fact turned out to be a small reclusive girl from Vermont! Or the ultimate survivalist series where two people have to survive naked for 21 days in various unpleasant hostile environments, called 'Naked and Afraid'! At the risk of leaving the impression that I watch a lot of this stuff, which I certainly don't (!), I have noticed that there is a sub-genre of this reality TV that centers around the court room. We have Judge Judy and a number of other TV judges whose cases can be viewed for the audience's interest, entertainment and edification.

Like all Reality TV, they can be compelling and amusing. Yet, I think one is always left with a sense of discomfort and unease after watching them. All Reality TV seems to consist largely of showing the problems and quirks of ordinary people, and usually poor people, and serving up their lives as entertainment for we, the knowing masses. When it comes to the TV Judges this remains true, but they have the added concern of serving up the very serious business of the judicial process and justice as light entertainment as well.

I did see a clip of a rather nice version of this where a Rhode Island Judge called Judge Caprio, has established a niche in the market as a kindly and

merciful judge that takes people's circumstances very much into account in his judgements. They are mostly low-level cases like parking or speeding violations.

It is nice to watch, and it kind of restores your faith in the system in some ways.

In today's Epistle we have one of those essential contrasts that make up so much of theology and life for that matter. On the one hand we have the mountain of the law, Mount Sinai, where Moses received the Ten Commandments from the transcendent God in all his unapproachable awe, fear and majesty. This is the God of the blazing fire and darkness, the God that a man cannot look upon and live. From this mountain comes the law.

In contrast, on the other hand, the writer points to Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the City of Christ, on which men and women live in fellowship with God through his son whose face we can see, indeed must see, in order to have life in all its fullness. On this mountain there resides mercy, forgiveness, freedom and redemption.

When you think about it, our lives are filled with such oppositions and contrasts, light and dark, order and chaos, male and female, conservative and liberal, sorrow and joy, life and death, and many more. Each opposite

seems utterly separate from its mirror image, and yet the truth is that they are utterly dependent on each other.

For example, you need order, reliability, and structure for things to get done, and for life to be possible. Yet you also need an element of chaos, because that is where disruption, creativity, and imagination reside and from there new ideas are born. A society that is all order may work well, but it is rigid and fixed and brittle and, when things change it can not adapt. A society that is all chaos, is full of change, and creativity and new ideas but, without order, none of the new ideas can ever be translated into action and brought to fruition. All these opposites are in fact inextricably tied together.

The Chinese symbol of the Yin and Yang expresses this vividly. It is a single circle with two swirling shapes like tad poles in it, one black and one white. Within each swirl there is a dot of the opposite color, A dot of white in the black and a dot of black in the white. What this is saying is that these opposites are in fact bound up together and indeed, all contain something of the other in each. Masculine and Feminine for instance, may be contrasting and different in some fundamental ways, but they are not only totally bound up together and essential to each other, but they also contain something of the other in each of them. The feminine contains some masculine and the masculine some feminine.

In this morning's Gospel we have the lovely story of Jesus, in the Synagogue, healing the woman who has been bent double for 18 years. In doing so, Jesus receives criticism from the head of the Synagogue since it is the sabbath and, in his reading of the law no work, including healing, could be done on the Sabbath Day. Here we have a clash of the two mountains, Mount Sinai and Mount Zion, the law and the Kingdom Jesus is proclaiming. It would appear that Jesus is arguing that the law should be broken. In fact though he is not saying that at all. He states very clearly in Mathew 5:17, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

He is saying that to heal this woman is not to break the law but to keep the spirit of it in every way.

Law, we recognize, on its own does not give justice. That is why we have judges. Justice equals law plus judgement, and that judgement includes humanity and mercy. That is why the TV Judge Caprio from Rhode Island is loved. He demonstrates that law without compassion and some human judgement as to people's many and varied circumstances cannot be just.

The leader of the Synagogue is wrong, not because he seeks to abide by the law. He is wrong because God gave the law to Moses in the darkness

and fire of the mountain, to give some boundaries in order that human beings could find freedom and life, but it is the freedom and life that are sought and cherished, and not the boundaries purely for their own sake. What Jesus brings from the other Mountain, from Mount Zion, the city of the living God, is that all systems require humanity and mercy to make them alive and not dead. As Jesus says elsewhere, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” All law is made to make human flourishing possible and is a means to that end.

So today, what do we take away with us from these readings? Well, I take this.

First, all the mountains in life, the contrasts and opposites we inhabit and live between; that even seem at times to be in deep conflict with each other, all, in fact, need each other. We need order and chaos, law and mercy, conservative thinking and liberal thinking, some dark and some light, and we also need an understanding of God that knows him as both a consuming fire that is beyond all things, but that is also the intimate presence who comes to us week by week at this altar rail.

Second, that all systems, all structures of rules and laws, need the judgement, mercy and humanity inspired by the Holy Spirit to make them

live. That goes for all of them, political, economic, legal, and yes, ecclesiastical. We need rules and structures and systems for sure. Without them life would be impossible, but they cannot deliver justice or life without the spirit that inspires us, (as the blessing that Elizabeth Keeler often uses says), “to be swift to love and to make haste to be kind.” Jesus heals the woman. She stands up straight and tall for the first time in 18 years. That is what religion is supposed to do. That is what the law is supposed to make possible. Whenever we have the opportunity to help people raise their heads again, and find healing, self-respect and hope, we should indeed be swift to act.

If, preferably not by texting them while you are driving, or you may find that the law will be more concerned about the people you might crash into than your desire to communicate the good news! Switch off your phone and talk to God. Text while driving if you want to see him!