

A SERMON BY THE REVEREND ELIZABETH F. KEELER

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost



2 September 2018

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Psalm 15

James 1:17-27

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

It's wonderful to be back after a few weeks away during which my family spent two exciting weeks in Portugal and Morocco and then a third week taking our sons to college. Our two boys, Jack and Jamie, were already grown when I arrived at Christ Church so you may not know them well, but suffice it to say they are quite different. Despite being only fifteen months apart in age they are reminiscent of the original Odd Couple - Felix and Oscar. Jamie prefers order and tidiness and structure while Jack feels and emotes his way through life, the messier the better. Their differences are illustrated brilliantly in the room they share which has a dividing line straight down the middle - Jamie's side neat as a pin, Jack's all jumble and muddle. The gift is that they have been able to coexist in shared space and thrive, mostly in harmony, for nineteen years. They are truly each other's best friend and they make each other better people.

I share this with you because it's a simple illustration of how the tension between two approaches, seemingly opposite positions, can actually be healthy and positive when set against one another. And we all know this intuitively - that two distinct approaches, when worked through with effort and care, offer the potential for deeper experiences and truths.

In today's Gospel Jesus warns against the danger of a one-sided approach. We can think of it as the structured approach - or Jamie's side of the room. The specific issue in question is that the Pharisees and scribes call out Jesus and his weary disciples because they hadn't washed their hands before eating and thus they were eating with "defiled hands" and ignoring the strict laws of the elders. With absolute clarity, Jesus makes plain that this specific observance of ancient Jewish tradition had become a stumbling block, a religious custom like so many others, that over time had become rigid and devoid of its spiritual meaning. In other words, the ritual evolved into being more important than the truth behind it. Redirecting people back to the deeper meaning behind the law was a major theme of Jesus' and a consistent source of tension between him and the Jewish authorities. And so Jesus calls his followers, and us, not to be so concerned with the external, rigid practices of faith that we forget where the ritual is supposed to direct us - always to God. In other words, observing a tradition is pointless unless it leads to transformed behavior - loving God and loving neighbor more deeply.

Now I'd like for us to hold this teaching we find repeatedly in the Gospel, against a counter one. Now we're moving over to Jack's jumbled side of the room, which is sometimes where I think the Church finds itself today. Under-structured in our faith as opposed to over-structured as the Pharisees were. Lauren Winner makes this point eloquently in her book "Mudhouse Sabbath." Winner grew up in Charlottesville and was raised Jewish.

After college, she converted to Christianity, became an Episcopalian, moved back to Charlottesville and joined Christ Episcopal Church, which was located exactly two blocks from her childhood temple. In her book "Mudhouse Sabbath" Winner writes about the rituals and customs embedded in Judaism that she misses as an Episcopalian.

The winner is now part of the religion department at Duke and as devoted an Episcopalian as I know and yet she writes this: “I still miss some of my Jewish ways, the rhythms and routines that drew the sacred down into the everyday. I miss Sabbaths on which I actually rested. I have even found that I miss the drudgery of keeping Kosher because I miss the work these practices effected between me and God.”

I had a similar albeit strange experience when we were in northern Africa in a majority Muslim country. Hearing the hauntingly beautiful call to prayer blasted out five times a day caught me off guard. I was keenly aware of crowds flocking to pray while I wasn't praying. My instinct was quickly to look for a Christian church or at least say the Lord's Prayer to myself. Just as I recovered we would hear the call to prayer again - the chant echoing off rooftops across the entire land. Our days in Morocco passed with that constant call in the background and I'm still left wondering what it would mean if Christians had a prayer discipline approaching that. Like Lauren Winner, I wonder if in our current faith context we're a bit too messy and loose and perhaps could use more rigor and structure to our faith. Has Protestantism lost so many of its embedded practices and rituals that we're adrift? Are yoga and meditation and vegan diets filling our spiritual void?

Today we've just glimpsed a few approaches to faith. The Pharisees had lost their understanding of the true purpose of religious laws. They forgot that rituals are always intended to point in one single direction - God and the greater glory of God. And we all know that religious acts wielded as weapons to oppress or marginalize or harm have nothing to do with God. And so don't get me wrong; I'm not advocating that an Islamic like a call to prayer be broadcasted across Georgetown. And I have a great appreciation that Christ Church rings her bells three times a day when we say the daily office, but realistically nobody's stopping what they're doing and racing to the chapel. Not even me sometimes when I'm at my desk next door and Tim's saying noonday prayer.

So where's the middle? Where's that sweet spot in the center of the room that brings forth the best in us, that makes us better Christians, stronger followers of Christ? How do we find the tension between extremes of faith - rigid and over-structured versus under-structured and a bit too messy? These are big questions but ones I look forward to exploring together. We have some wonderful education and formation programs planned this year intended to draw us closer to one another and God. I do know that we have a real shot of finding truth and answers here, together, with one another, in the context of our beautiful Episcopal faith and traditions. And it feels wonderful to back home, here with you, starting that work again.

Amen.



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