



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 2, 2018

DEUTERONOMY 4:1-2, 6-9; PSALM 15; JAMES 1:17-27; MARK 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

RITUALS AND THE REIGN OF GOD

My dog has obsessive compulsive disorder. It's true. He's been diagnosed by the vet and is on Prozac. I didn't even know this was a thing dogs could get until several months ago. I knew people could have it. My therapist has diagnosed me with obsessive compulsive tendencies. And, I'm not surprised. I have some behaviors, that when I'm stressed I'll admit can get to a compulsive point. In fact, I've been known to at times clean zealously when I am stressed out—my wife really likes this trait though. Most people actually have a thing or two that they can fixate on. Athletes and musicians have been noted to be particularly prone. Ludwig van Beethoven was said to suffer from it. And, more than one basketball player has been known to bounce a ball a certain number of times before shooting. Even other animals get compulsive and follow rituals. Raccoons notoriously will wash things. Whales and dolphins will carry their dead.

Recently J35, an orca whale off the coast of Washington carried her dead calf for 17 days and over 1000 miles, leading researchers to think that her behavior might endanger her.

But, my dog. He licks the air. He'll sit on the couch and just lick. And lick. And lick. For hours. His meds have been a great help though and he's gotten much better. Now he only licks things when he wants to. And, usually they're toys, food, and treats. Or, oddly enough my ears. I guess I'm just delicious.

Poor Moses, though. I bet he wishes the Israelites had a little bit more compulsion. He's constantly having to remind the people to follow the laws that God has passed onto them. But they falter, they forget, they worship idols, and generally go against the teachings.

Today we hear Moses tell them that they must “observe [the laws] diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples”¹

¹ Deuteronomy 4:6 (NRSV)

and “take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life...”²

And, why is it so important to follow the laws? Because God and the law are interconnected. There is a Jewish legend that tells us that when God created the Torah, God went around to every nation and offered them the law. But, they all refused. And then God offers it to Israel and they accepted.³ Moses reminds the people that no other nation has God so close to them. And, it is a wonderful and true thing for the people to hear.

But I would be remiss at this point, on my last Sunday here as Worship Coordinator, to not tell you about the great power of worship, ritual, practice, and liturgy.

Liturgy is routinely defined as the work of the people. It is also what we come together week after week to share in. But, theologian James K.A. Smith takes this definition one step further. He teaches that liturgies are rituals that form our identities.⁴ They help us to orient ourselves to the world and teach us what we should hope and work for. In many ways they train us in how to shape what we consider to be the good life. This was the point of the laws, the rituals, and the commandments.

But, as much as Moses is telling us to follow the law, Mark is warning us to follow it for the right reasons.

Rituals are incredibly formative. Did you know that only about 5% of our daily activity is the product of conscious, intentional actions that we ‘choose?’⁵ A shocking 95%, then, is the result of the practices that we engage in that shape our unconscious.

I think that is why Jesus is particularly strong in his admonition. As a good Jewish boy, Jesus was most certainly not telling his followers that they should abandon the laws. If anything he wants them to focus on the laws in a more scrutinizing way. He doesn’t want us going through the motions.

And above all, he doesn’t ever want us to think that we are gaining God’s grace through actions. We have the law because God loves us and wants us to flourish. Let me say that again: we have the law because God loves us and wants us to flourish.

But, law is a funny thing. Sometimes we use it to hide behind. At all levels of society we hide behind practices and use them as barriers that separate “us” from “them.” We’ve seen the danger in recent times when we use legislation and power to diminish the value of other people and to place ourselves above our world. All of the evil intentions that Jesus lists are about how we live in relation to other people.

It makes me think of the words by the great and Grammy-Award winning Seattle prophets Macklemore and Ryan Lewis: “When I was at church they taught me something else/If you preach hate at the service, those words aren't

² Deuteronomy 4:9 (NRSV)

³ Howard Schwartz, *Tree of Souls: The Mythology of Judaism*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 264.

⁴ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 86.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

anointed/That holy water that you soak in has been poisoned.”⁶ This is as true in our houses of worship as it is in our houses of legislature. If we are to survive, all that we are and all that we practice must be for the good of all people. When we forget that we are lost.

James’ letter helps to bridge Moses’ and Jesus’ teachings. He tells us that God is the “implanted word”⁷ in each of us. But, this word needs to be nurtured. It is nurtured through practicing the faith or as James puts it, “be doers of the word, and not merely hearers...”⁸ He reminds us that what comes out of our mouths comes from our hearts and that our religion calls us to care for the most vulnerable in our world. We do good works because God loves us, not to make God love us—our works flow from God’s love and grace in our lives. This is the faith that we are proud to confess. I am convinced, and science backs me up, that our practices affect how we engage with the world and with God.

Take the Eucharist for example. Bread and wine are gathered, blessed, broken, and then shared with the community. The ritual practice of sharing in communion forms us. Each time we come to church, we are gathered, we are blessed, we are broken, and we are released into the world to carry out the teachings that form us here. This practice shapes us to instinctively share ourselves to serve the world. And, in doing so, it forms us so that we can better seek God, so that we can follow God more readily, and help to bring about the good life, the reign of God, and creation’s flourishing.

I want to leave you with one final story:

“A holy man was having a conversation with the Lord one day and said, ‘Lord, I would like to know what Heaven and Hell are like.’ The Lord led the holy man to two doors. He opened one of the doors and the holy man looked in. In the middle of the room was a large round table. In the middle of the table was a large pot of stew which smelled delicious and made the holy man’s mouth water. The people sitting round the table were thin and sickly. They appeared to be famished. They were holding spoons with very long handles that were strapped to their arms and each found it possible to reach into the pot of stew and take a spoonful, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they could not get the spoons back into their mouths. The holy man shuddered at the sight of their misery and suffering. The Lord said, ‘You have seen Hell.’ They went to the next room and opened the door. It was exactly the same as the first one. There was the large round table with the large pot of stew which made the holy man’s mouth water. The people were equipped with the same long-handled spoons, but *here* the people were well nourished and plump, laughing and talking. The holy man said, ‘I don’t understand.’ ‘It is simple’ said the Lord, ‘it requires but one skill. You see, they have learned to feed each other, while the greedy think only of themselves.’”⁹

We gather for worship. What we do here is dangerous. It will cost you. And, it will change your life. It causes us to live not just for

⁶ Macklemore and Ryan Lewis, “Same Love,” *The Heist*, Macklemore LLC, 2012.

⁷ James 1:21 (NRSV)

⁸ James 1:22 (NRSV)

ourselves, but to be constantly thinking about others.

In its archaic form, the word worship meant “acknowledging of worth.” As we lean into our worship of God, I would challenge you this morning to examine what practices form you in every facet of your life.

Do all your rituals reflect and feed your identity and what you hold to be of value?

Or, are you just going through the motions?

⁹ Ben Witherington, “*The difference between heaven and hell (on earth)*,” September 6, 2006, retrieved from

<http://benwitherington.blogspot.com/2006/09/difference-between-heaven-and-hell-on.html>

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 [*When the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,*

*‘This people honors me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me,
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’*

You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.” For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”]

