

Bible Study
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany, Year A
February 12, 2017

[RCL] Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-31

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Moses is coming to the end of his final sermon. He has laid out before Israel the whole of the law, including its covenantal blessings and curses (28:1-68). He has reminded the people that, if they lose their way, the repentant will be ever-welcomed back into God's mercies (30:1-10). And, by way of conclusion, he speaks the words we read today: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity" (v.15).

But lest God's people then or now misunderstand him, Moses defines what true life, true prosperity, is. It is not a ten-figure bank account, a dream-come-true romance, or a secure and stable future. Instead, it is "loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him" (v. 20). The Lord is our life, and even amidst trouble and trial, "holding fast to him" is our prosperity. It is true God has promised to bless obedience, but the core of this blessing is union with God. All other blessings come as fruit from this union. To "dwell in the land" (v. 20), therefore, is primarily to enjoy the special presence of the Lord, from whom all blessings flow.

- Love and obedience are tightly linked in this and many other scriptural passages. How does this link transform or deepen our understanding of life with God?
- What might it look like to "hold fast to God" in daily life?

Psalm 119:1-8

Throughout Psalm 119, we see two contrasting figures: those happy people who keep the law faultlessly and delight in doing so, and the writer of the psalm, who wishes he was one of the people he describes. It is not that the psalmist has no desire to walk the narrow and righteous way of the Lord. On the contrary, he wants nothing more. After describing the ways of the obedient with overwhelming reverence, he writes, "Oh that my ways were made so direct."

But instead of either promising what he will never be able to produce, *or* excusing himself from a seemingly impossible way of life, he speaks both a pledge and a plea: "I will keep your statutes; do not utterly forsake me" (v. 8). He cries out in the only posture we frail creatures can rightfully take before an almighty and perfect God. He expresses his longing to be the Lord's in heart and soul and mind and body—speaks it, in fact, as if it were already the case—and then pleads for the Lord's assistance, for the Lord alone can accomplish what the psalmist has dared to request.

- How can Psalm 119 shape the way we pray?
- How does the psalmist's clear delight in the law of the Lord transform or inform the way we think about "law"?

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

All of us at some point or another have heard someone's actions be excused with the acknowledgement, "They're only human." The excuse is understandable. Despite the modern world's discomfort with the word "sin," most would admit that people aren't perfect; we're bound to make mistakes and argue, bound to gossip and complain, bound (at least every now and then, we say,) to act on our lower impulses rather than our more noble ideals.

Paul, however, knocks that excuse flat on its back when it stumbles out of the mouths of the new Christians in Corinth. According to Paul, the follower of Christ who "[behaves] according to human inclinations" (v. 3) and acts as if he or she were still "merely human" (v.4), is a contradiction. For "we know that our old self"—our "only human" self—"was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom 6:6). With that in mind, "jealousy and quarrelling" (v. 3) aren't to be excused as the inevitable outcome of any gathering of people, but they are to be mourned and repented of as sins which mar God's holy temple. The Church is called always to repent of its sins and to put itself each day anew into the hands of God who both purifies and brings to maturity.

- What have you been excusing as "only human" which perhaps might call for deeper repentance and the transforming mercy of God?
- In the second portion of the text, Paul addresses the Corinthians' confusion between human labor and God's accomplishment. How can we both appropriately honor human service in the Church while continuing to honor, praise, and follow Christ above all?

Matthew 5:21-37

In ages long past, a servant stood on a mountaintop with a God wrapped in fire, in order to receive the holy law. In our text today, other servants stand on a mountaintop with the same God, now wrapped in flesh, in order to receive a second law which affirms and intensifies the first. Murder has always been forbidden; now unchecked anger is revealed as the heart's intent to kill. Adultery was never acceptable; now adultery with the eyes and mind is shown to be as evil as adultery with the body.

But how to fulfill such a law, and why even try? We are not saved by works. And yet, Jesus said not only to hear his words, but to *do* them (Mat 7:24). We are not saved because we are righteous, but we are saved *that we might become righteous*. Through Christ—who fulfilled the law (Mat 5:17)—anger has no power in us, lust has no dominion. These and every other evil have been taken down to death, and through union with Christ, they are killed daily in us as well. We are called into a higher life—Jesus' life—and we are given his Spirit to carry on God's good work in us to the day of its completion, when we are at last made one with Christ (Phil 1:6).

- How is the Sermon on the Mount a blessing to the Church, as the Mosaic Law was a blessing to Israel?
- Which portion of the reading can you be practicing through the power of Christ in order to obey his command to not only "hear these words...[but do] them" (Mat. 7:24)?

Written by Deanna Briody. Briody is studying Church History and Theology at Trinity School for Ministry in Western Pennsylvania. She hopes to pursue further studies at the graduate level. In her spare time she enjoys writing poetry, playing volleyball, and reading novels.

Published by the Office of Formation of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017. © 2017 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.