

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 30, 2009  
The Rev. Eric Olaf Olsen

Our God is close...Oh so close...So close to comfort. Can you feel that comfort?

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus talks about the purpose of the law and how God's children are to relate to the law. In the verses that make up our lesson and also the ones that the crafters of the lectionary decided to circumvent, Jesus states that the stuff we ingest goes into our stomach and then into the sewer. That which we eat can not contaminate our holy state of being. The stuff that we generate internally, which seeps from our mouths in the form of words, or emerge from us in the form of actions or things that we fail to produce in the form of non-actions can subtract from our sacred state and make us unclean, common, unhallowed, and defiled.

Jesus' is on the defensive, but he is being quite offensive. We might hear this story and think that Jesus is giving a royal flush to the observance of the Law or Torah with which the Pharisees were obsessed. Our grace dominant theology might even lead us to shout a little... "You tell them Jesus! Tell them what they can do with their law." But do we really understand Jesus' words and Jesus' challenge to us today?

This week a blurb surfaced in the news about the appendix. Darwin believed it to be a vestige, a rudimentary organ which outlived its purpose after humans stopped eating raw leaves. Scientists have now determined that its function was more immunological and less digestive. This small sack that hangs off of our intestines would aid our immune system by helping to repopulate our gut with good bacteria after a terrible case of diarrhea. Sort of like an emergency container of *Activia*. Perhaps if Jamie Lee Curtis did a couple of television commercials for the appendix it would help raise its image among organs- ya think?

Today our immune system is not challenged as much and the appendix is not called upon to work. Our appendix therefore doesn't maintain a good physique, it gets fat and lazy and sometimes even infected. Scientists hope that by finding ways to challenge our immune system regularly, we may decrease the almost pandemic prevalence of auto-immune diseases and help prevent appendicitis and other serious conditions that develop from inaction.

We can apply this correlation between lethargy and health to our physical being in general. We don't hunt and gather as our ancestors had and the closest we might get to that is to watch a National Geographic special or an episode of *Survivor Man*. We drive to the store, wheel a cart down the aisle, and the most exercise we get from that activity is putting away our stuff when we get home. The result is that we are generally overweight and we have mobility problems because of our weight. We need new knees and hips and our cholesterol climbs as does our blood pressure.

Mentally we also tend to problem solve less and instead ingest a steady stream of gossip and sensationalized news on television and radio. We accept the advice of self proclaimed experts and suspend critical thinking. We become swollen with information, and addicted to the speed and volume by which we can receive it. We forget about the natural link between information and action and instead become media zombies.

Spiritually, dare I say we also run the risk of a having an acute "spiriticitis" or "faithicitis." We hear the Good news of the gospel and smile. We think to ourselves, "...that Jesus, what a guy!" We say, "You know, one day I'm going to do such and such for the Lord", and the day never comes. We pick churches like fast food restaurants. We want it our way. We shy away from being challenged and our faith grows cold and lethargic. We stop making leaps of faith and due to spiritual atrophy we can barely manage a baby step.

Does any of this resonate with you? It resonates with me.

So what was so wrong with the way that the Pharisees were living? They weren't being lazy. Can both action and inaction be wrong? Is Jesus putting us in a double bind?

The Pharisees were devoted to following the letter of the law. According to our first lesson this should be a good thing. There is a very close connection between God and the law and in following the law the Pharisees believed they would get closer to God. They seemed to have slid down the slippery slope of observance and to the hard ground of idolatry. They lost sight of the intention of the law. Jesus gets in their faces, too close for their comfort, to get them to acknowledge their spiritual nearsightedness so that he can do some corrective vision surgery in their hearts.

The intention of the entire law of God was the same back then as is today. It is to keep us safe and to remind us of the, "Giver of every perfect gift" to paraphrase the opening line of our epistle for today in the first chapter of James. The law is a gift from God. In Deuteronomy the people are reminded that their God is unlike the gods of their neighbors because their God is close by whenever they call. Following the law gives life. The few verses that are omitted from our lesson today remind the hearers that those who abandon the law abandon God and find death.

It is perhaps also important to note that Deuteronomy was written after the priestly law, near the end of the time of the exile to Babylon. Here the law is recounted and reinterpreted to address contemporary life in modern language. It deals with the problem of the Diaspora and their return to a broken land. In trying to make sense of how and why they were defeated and dragged away they most likely remembered the call of the prophets to repent and believed their divine protection lapsed because of their unfaithfulness. So the message that is pounded home is that faith is measured through allegiance to the law.

If we fast forward again to Jesus' interaction with the Pharisees, we see that the purity laws they were debating with Jesus were more closely associated with the priestly writer who penned Leviticus and not the

covenant law given by God directly to the people by Moses. These cultic laws were crafted to help the people of Israel to remain healthy (who can debate the health benefits of frequent hand washing) and to grow their population. It is not then surprising that among the hundreds of priestly laws, many which we do not follow, such as prohibiting the wearing a garment made of two kinds of fabrics, we find a statement that renounces homosexuality.

So we are again reminded that committing ourselves to the study of the context and purpose of scripture is crucial for all people of faith. We should not apply the law arbitrarily and apply scripture in a way that disregards the original context and the current context. This is precisely what Jesus is trying to teach today.

So how can we going about receiving the life that comes through adherence to the law as we hear in Deuteronomy without becoming Pharisaical nearsighted hypocrites? And what kind of protection do we receive when we follow the law? After all it sounds like a big undertaking, so we need to know what is in it for us... Right?

Perhaps that is how the Pharisees felt too. They needed to know how they would benefit from changing the way they were living. How would God reward them? Remember their goal of following the letter of the law was to feel the closeness of God. How ironic is it that in their tunnel vision they reject and chastise the living Messiah of God. They wanted to be close to God, all they had to do was reach out and touch Him, but instead they cast an eye of judgment, crossed their arms in an arrogant pose and pushed Jesus away.

Early Monday morning Lt. Charles McCarthy and FF Jonathan Croom of the Buffalo Fire Department responded to a report of a person trapped in a burning building on the corner of Bailey and Genesee. They entered the fully involved building and plunged through the floor to a dark place of fire and ash- a place without air to breath, a place of death- an image that FF Croom's mothers said she will awake to every day of her life.

I had the sacred privilege of attending and participating in both of the funeral services on Friday. The passage that Father Joe Bain, the Chief Chaplain of the Buffalo Fire Department, read at Lt. McCarthy's funeral was from Matthew 25. Here is a section of that passage.

“...Come, my Father has given you his blessing. Receive the kingdom God has prepared for you since the world was made. <sup>35</sup> I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was alone and away from home, and you invited me into your house. <sup>36</sup> I was without clothes, and you gave me something to wear. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me...I tell you the truth, anything you did for even the least of my people here, you also did for me...”

Chaplain Kenny Williams also of the Buffalo Fire Department spoke about FF Croom's unique way of greeting someone. He would grab your hand and pull you in real close. When Chip and Jon heard that there was a report of someone trapped they responded in like manner-to pull that person from isolation and danger into safety. They entered the building to save that persons life. In doing so they acted as agents of God, as images of Christ. Their faith was activated and God walked with them and God even plunged with them. And just as Moses reminded God's people that God was near to them every time they called... God was near Lt. Chip McCarthy and FF Jonathan Croom in their cries and they were delivered, and God will respond to the cries of those who are overcome with grief.

This is how the Lord responds to us also when we cry for help.

To be sure, God loves all of us equally. Those firefighters did not earn any special favor by the way they died. We all earned a special favor by the way our Lord died to get close to us and to draw us near on the cross. But so often we push God away. We become legalistic and isolate or banish another child of God or a group of God's children away from us. We pick and choose laws we wish to follow and use them as weapons against others. We ignore the fact that Christ died for all.

The beautiful witness that Lt. Chip and FF Jon provide for us is that of understanding. They “Got it.” They understood that they were, as James puts it, “first fruits”. Traditionally, the first produce harvested was dedicated and offered up to God. They offered themselves and all that they had been given back to God. When we respond to the cries of others, we honor Christ’s sacrifice and actually become for others an image of Christ, just as Chip and Jon did.

At the beginning of Senator Edward Kennedy’s funeral Mass, Father Monan said that in this sacred space on this day the private life of faith and prayer and the public life of compassion and service come together and we see that it was indeed one life.

When God heard the cries of God’s people and responded by sending his son, who came to teach about love and the proper use of the law which is to bring about a deep love for the giver of the law. Jesus was killed because he explained the missing link between worship and practical living; between orthodoxy and orthopraxy. If you love the Lord, you will live your life to help others know the love of God through you. Never will you seek to harm another with your words or actions, but instead you will be near to them when they call even if it kills you figuratively or literally.

Jesus was killed in teaching us, but He Is Risen Indeed! Alleluia! -And although we may die many small deaths one true physical death..... We too will rise, because God can’t stand being apart from us. That is how much love God has for you and me. God will pull us close.

And rest assured like the phoenix rising from the ashes, but even more brilliant than that, Lt. McCarthy and FF. Croom are living into the promise of the resurrection as we speak.

Our God is close, oh so close, so close to comfort. Can you feel that comfort?