

Sermon for the Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

February 16, 2020

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Psalm 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Deuteronomy 30:15-29

Matthew 5:21-37

A Frenchman was a specialist at stealing famous works of art from the Louvre. He was very skilled at getting paintings out. However, as he climbed into his van, he only drove two miles before it ran out of gas right in front of a policeman who was searching for him. The policeman scratched his head and said, "How did you make this mistake? Fancy not filling up the van with gas." The thief replied: "I had no Monet to buy Degas to make the Van Gogh."

What message is there in the humorous art thief story?

The thief was not a very good thief. Although he succeeded in stealing the priceless works of art, he failed to think through his getaway. If you desire to be a thief (which of course God and the church do not recommend), then be a good one. If you are going to be a Christian, then be a good one. It isn't simply our actions that matter, but also our interior life and disposition are important.

Today's lesson from Deuteronomy, Psalm 119, 1 Corinthians and Matthew's Gospel all speak clearly about how our actions and internal life are connected.

Moses tells us to obey the commandments of the Lord. If our hearts turn away and we are led astray, we shall perish. We are to choose life so we and our descendants may live by loving God and obeying Him.

The writer of Psalm 119 tells us we will not be put to shame if we regard all God's commandments. If we seek God with all our hearts, we will be walking in His ways.

Paul told the people of Corinth we are God's servants working together; we are God's field, God's building. Happy are they who observe his decrees and seek him with all their hearts.

Matthew reminds us we shouldn't murder but we also should not get angry or even insult others. Adultery is wrong but so is the all-consuming lust for another. Jesus wants us to be good both on the inside and the outside.

Each day, we make thousands of small choices concerning the things that we do and the things we think. Most of these choices are made without too much forethought. In fact, most of us go about our daily lives spending a significant portion just reacting to events. Often, our actions are simply the result of impulse or habit. God asks that we slow down long enough to think about the choices that we make, and He asks that we make those choices in accordance with His commandments.

Jesus lived and ministered in the midst of criticisms. However, he never retaliated by shaming and blaming others. Through it all, Jesus trusted deeply in God. His model, though hard to follow, is that we should all seek to embrace -to not harm, blame, or judge others but treat everyone with dignity, respect, and – most of all – love.

God is good and we need to praise Him and be on good terms – whether we feel like it or not! We should not wait until we get an answer to our prayers or a blessing from God in order to praise Him. God is our never-ending source of strength, courage, and hope if we call upon Him.

How many of us stumble out of bed in the morning and head straight for the coffee pot? Though we are not yet thinking clearly, we are awake enough to move toward that coffee to help us unscramble our sleepy thoughts.

There is another way. Jesus can perform a similar function for us when our minds stumble in His direction as opposed to the coffee pot. All we have to do is ask so we can communicate deeply with Him and follow his commandments.

Praise and worship of God are always acts of will. Sometimes our problems or the burdens we carry choke out our good intentions, so we have to make the effort to establish praise as a way of life. And it becomes a way of life when we make it our first reaction to what we face and not a last resort. That's when we find true freedom in the Lord.

In the Old Testament, the people who carried the Ark of the Covenant stopped every six steps to worship. We, too, need to remind ourselves not to go very far without stopping to worship. For spiritual well-being, we have to be six-step persons and continually invite the presence of the Lord to rule our situations. We have to be free to praise Him no matter what our circumstances.

In a recent episode of Lynn Johnston's Sunday newspaper comic strip **For Better or For Worse** (December 15, 2019) 13 year-old Michael complains to his mom, "Mom, there's nothing to wear!"

"Michael!", his mother counters, "You won't go shopping with me, and the last time I gave you money to buy your own clothes, you didn't buy anything!"

A few minutes later, Michael is staring out the window. “There’s nothing to do,” he whines.

His mother reminds him, “Brian asked you to go swimming and your dad asked you if you’d go downtown with him. You turned them both down.”

Mom next encounters Michael plopped in front of the television, the sound turned down. “There’s nothing to watch,” Michael gripes.

Mom says pointedly “There are plenty of channels to choose from and you have video games to play.”

In the next-to-last panel, Dad comes home from his errands to find Michael just sitting in a chair, a forlorn expression on his face. “What’s with Michael?” Dad asks.

Mom sighs. “There’s nothing to complain about.”

Today’s Scripture readings are about attitude and perspective. Jesus asks us to consider not just our feelings and sins-the acts themselves-but the self-centeredness at the heart of our actions. To embrace happiness is a choice we make; we decide whether or not to engage the world with a perspective of hope and possibility. Michael’s pessimism is his own making, and his wise mom calls him on it. On a much deeper and more serious level, Jesus challenges us to confront the anger, the bigotry, the self-righteousness that we use to justify our selfish behavior: the attitudes that tear families and communities apart, that destroy our own sense and self-respect as well as diminishing the basic human dignity of others. To follow Jesus is to see the possibilities we have for doing good things and to accept God’s grace to make such good a reality. Our actions and internal lives are connected. What

happens in our heads and hearts is as important as what we do through our actions.

Let us Pray!

Lord, every step of our life's journey is a choice...and the quality of those choices determine the quality of our journey. Our interior life matters as much as our actions. We Praise and Thank You for Your commandments – our guide for better living. Amen!

Resources for this Sermon:

- Joy for the Journey, Vol. 1, A Womans' Book of Joyful Promises, page 83.
- Connections for Feb. 16, 2020
- Lectionary Levity by Ian S. Markham and Samantha R.D. Gottlich, page 27 and 28
- The New International Interpreter's Study Bible
- Forward Day by Day for Feb. 9th, 2020
- God's Guide for Food Fitness, and Faith for Women, p. 91