



Give Heed So That You May Live

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 & Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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The 14th Sunday after Pentecost

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Way back when I was a student learning the trade of biblical scholarship, I led Bible study at our church. I'm very grateful for that small group that met faithfully every Sunday morning for ten years or more, and allowed me to share what I was learning. One morning we had a newcomer, a fellow who had worshipped with us a few times, joined us. I don't remember anymore what book of the Bible we were studying but at some point in the conversation this man shared with us that he was going through a really messy divorce. He was absolutely infuriated that his daughters had filed affidavits saying he was an abusive father who had sexually molested them. He went on and on about how the Bible teaches that children must obey their fathers, ranting about his daughters who refused to obey him. I still remember the horrible sick feeling in my stomach as I listened to, and the awkward, uncomfortable silence of the rest of the group.

I share this incident with you because I think it illustrates what Jesus is trying to get at in our gospel lesson for today - how human reasoning all too often ends up twisting God's word.

In our Old Testament lesson, we hear Moses tell the people of Israel as they prepare to cross over into the Promised Land, "give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe so that you may live to enter and occupy the land, the Lord the God your ancestors is giving you" (Deuteronomy 4:1). The commandments are given to the Israelites so that they may live — not just survive or eke out some sort of existence — but to live fully and wholly, with integrity, in relationship with God, and in peace and security with one another. The biblical commandments are intended to teach God's people how to live together in wholesome, life-giving relationships. To that end, they teach worship. They establish norms for political, prophetic and religious leadership. They mandate communal holidays, festivals and times of rest for all people. They place limits on the practices of war and blood-vengeance. They ordain a just economy, communal care for the widow, the orphan, and the poor, and the protection of those who are vulnerable. They sanctify labor, meals and family life.¹

The biblical commandments are intended to teach God's people then and now how to be holy and whole, how to live with integrity, how to live as a people whose words and actions reveal the love, grace and mercy of God. But something strange happens in the way that God's people then and now use biblical commandments. God's people have this terrible tendency to use the commandments as proof of holier-than-thou-ness, justifying our own actions, scapegoating, judging, and excluding others. We even try to use biblical commandments as a measuring stick to

¹ Anthea Portier-Young at http://workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1372

determine who is acceptable to God and who deserves eternal life. It is these tendencies that Jesus critiques in today's gospel.

The Pharisees were a reformist group of lay people who sought to protect the holiness, wholeness and integrity of Israelite communities by separating themselves as much as possible from foreign influences. This is not, in and of itself an entirely wrong-headed goal, but it did have some negative consequences. The Pharisees focused much of their attention on purity rituals involving food, food preparation, and dining practices as ways of demonstrating their devotion to God. Not only did Jesus and his disciples not measure up to their standards of purity, but millions of God-fearing Judeans simply did not have the means to live out this program. Jesus' argument is that the Pharisees' emphasis on separation to maintain their purity, holiness, wholeness and integrity is at odds with God's mission to heal, renew and reconcile the whole world to God's self.

Jesus then goes after the scribes, whose salary was paid by the Temple in Jerusalem, for devising laws that actually made it impossible to obey the biblical commandments. *Korban* was money or assets willed to the Temple. These assets could no longer be used by the family, and even worse one could not be released from the vow of *korban* even if the funds were desperately needed to care for one's aging and ailing parents. Jesus accuses the scribes of caring more about enriching the temple than preserving the wholeness and integrity of families.

Both of these are examples of human reasoning at odds with God's mission in the world.

When Jesus turns to the crowds, he tells them, "Listen, and understand: there is nothing outside of a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." What we eat, regardless of how it is prepared or eaten, goes straight to our stomachs and ends up in the sewer. It is relatively harmless in comparison with the evil intentions that come out of our hearts: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. These are what destroy individuals, families, and communities.

Professor Karoline Lewis, calls today's gospel lesson a "come to Jesus text" that tells us pretty clearly that if you want to follow Jesus, you had better expect "an excruciating examination of yourself, your true intentions, your true beliefs, and on what you stake your relationship with God."² This is a "come to Jesus text" that challenges us to admit that we are not holy and whole, that all too often we lack integrity, that our thoughts and words and actions reveal that we are messed up, confused, and broken people.

The good news is that the one who convicts us for the evil intentions of our hearts, is also the one who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, who forgives our sins and remembers them no more. The good news is that God loves us messed up, confused and

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3678>

broken sinners so much that God sent Jesus not to condemn us but to save, heal and transform us. The good news is that the Jesus who convicts us is also the one who invites us: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-29). Come to me with all your messed up, confused and even evil intentions, together we will sort them out, together we will work on clearing up the mess and confusion, on healing the brokenness. Come to me and let me teach you about grace and mercy and forgiveness and love. Come.