

## Sermon Pentecost 14 b 2021

Are you a traditionalist? Do you like to do things in a regular way? I guess 2020 was a challenge for you trying to work out how best to deal with both Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations. Mike and I saw each of our 3 kids and their families on separate occasions for Christmas; I don't even remember what we did for Thanksgiving, probably nothing. But traditions can get out of hand, can't they? Author Antony DeMello tells a story about an ashram cat: He writes,

When the guru sat down to worship each evening the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshipers. So, he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship. After the guru died the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat died, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied during evening worship. Centuries later learned treatises were written by the guru's disciples on the religious and liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed."

You are probably laughing, right? But you may also have an ashram cat, maybe more than one. When we came to live in the US, I learned that Thanksgiving was the day I had to cook a turkey dinner. In Britain it had been the tradition that I cooked turkey on Christmas day; there was no November Thanksgiving celebration there. So, for several years I honored both traditions cooking turkey and dealing with left overs both months. Years later Mike said he really did not like turkey very much and as, by then both daughters and I were strict non-meat eaters I dropped cooking turkey on Christmas day, switching to roast lamb or something Mike really liked, for the meat eaters. I invite you to think about which ashram cats you have abandoned and which you have held on to?

I am speaking about this because in today's gospel Jesus was criticizing the religious leaders for their ways of doing things, their insistence that everyone had to do things the way they said they were to be done with no clear reasons for doing them. He saw through their hypocrisy. They made themselves out to be very holy people doing lots of ritualistic actions to impress everyone but with no intention of loving God and living their lives in such a way to show they honored God.

Of course, washing hands and vessels is important and I am sure you have been doing even more hand washing in the last 18 months than ever before. But you understand the reasons for doing it. I am sure you want to protect yourself from the threat of the covid virus and delta variant as well as needing to have clean hands to do certain tasks.

What Jesus goes on to say is also in both our first lesson as well as in the letter from James. It is the reminder of the importance of listening. It's as though Jesus, James and the writer of Deuteronomy are saying to you that you have to listen up. You could say that they are taking you back to childhood days when your mom (or whoever was at home with you) was forever saying, "Be a good listener." Of course, you like other kids may have been doing anything other than listening. In fact your mom was actually meaning when saying "listen" was, "Listen to what I am saying and do it." It's a "listen and obey" instruction, not just "listen and then forget what I said." When she said look both ways before crossing the street she meant you to do it!

What both the "lessons", and I am using that word instead of "readings" are saying that the words you hear are giving you instructions on how to live, so do it! The writer of the

Deuteronomy text is going a step further when he wrote, “ you must keep the commandments of the Lord your God....you must observe them diligently.... Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them fade from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. They are so important. The way God wanted the Hebrew people to live was the only way for them and they had to remember it always, God said. They had to remember it when they got up in the morning, throughout each day and at the end of the day. This was a big assignment. It was not negotiable either. One important point as that they were not to add anything. God had given them the law and that was it. So you might wonder why centuries after God had revealed the Ten Commandments to Moses the religious leaders decided to add many, many, additional laws to the existing ones. By Jesus time, there were over 600 laws (611 or 613 depending which resource you use!) It seems that the scribes whose job was to interpret the law felt there was some ambiguity, so they kept adding clauses or laws just to make sure there was no doubts in anyone’s mind what was expected. But of course how could anyone possibly remember 611 laws. This was what Jesus challenged when he often said, “The law says but I say....” He knew what God had intended and it was not all the extra details which had been poured on top. Jesus in fact made keeping God’s laws very simple. He said love God with every fiber of your being and love your neighbor (everyone you come into contact with) as much as you love yourself. He was in fact quoting from the laws in saying this.

How are you doing dealing with laws, on particular the laws of God. Remembering the summary Jesus state is much easier than remembering all the ones in the Old Testament but keeping them is very hard. Can you love God all day every day in all you do and say? James gives some help in how to do it in the words you heard today.

You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. Is being a good listener, someone who concentrates on hearing what is said instead of rushing to respond possible for you? It is very easy to start formulating your response to someone while they are still speaking instead of really listening. Listening is hard. Do you listen to God? It is much easier to take your request to God and do all the talking rather than listen to God. When did you last stop and just listen?

Recently I was reminded about how Jonathan Daniels listened to God and responded. He was a young man, a gifted young man we understand. He was challenged with the dilemma of choosing which path to follow when medical school, law school, seminary were all open to him. He heard God calling him and went to seminary. But this was 1965. He heard the call for him to visit the south and went. He returned to his seminary studies but that summer he heard God’s call again and he obeyed again, taking leave of absence from his seminary to go to Alabama. He was in a protest group and all of them were arrested but 5 of them were released very quickly. The next day he with a few were leaving a shop. In the group was a young black girl named Ruby. Jonathan saw a man emerge from behind a car with a shotgun and aimed it at Ruby. He acted swiftly pushing Ruby to the side and he received the bullets from the shotgun meant for her. His life ended that day and the Episcopal church has remembered and honored him in the last 30 years. He was someone who listened to God and then acted on God’s call to him.

I am pretty sure God is not calling any of us to go to the south to challenge abuses of civil rights, right now. But I am sure God wants us to listen to the messages we have heard today.