

## SPIRITUAL MATURITY

2/16/20 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Epiphany 6 (A): Sirach 15:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Yesterday some of us were at the diocesan Leadership Academy where some of the sessions featured a Racial Reconciliation program being used in churches across the country. Sitting there, I remembered an early experience I had with racism. It was during the Christmas vacation of my sophomore year of college, and I heard what I thought was a hilarious joke. An Asian person in my hometown had told the joke, so I couldn't wait to share it with my Asian friend back at school.

A few days after we had returned from Christmas break, a bunch of us were sitting around in one of our dorm rooms—four or five kids piled onto one twin bed, and another four or five squished onto the other bed just a few feet away—and I launched into this joke. As I neared the punch line, I started laughing, but quickly realized I was the only one laughing.

Thinking I must have messed up the joke, I surveyed my audience. Some of my friends were looking at me with the wide eyes of disbelief, a few had averted my gaze and were studying their feet, and a couple other were staring at our Asian friend with sad faces. Finally, after what seemed like several minutes of silence, he simply said, "Brenda, that's racist."

I was mortified! And even though part of me understood he was right, another part of me wanted to explain: "It can't be a racist joke, because I'm not racist." Luckily, I was smart enough to keep my mouth shut, and he was kind enough to give me another chance...to let me learn from my mistake.

I imagine the people of Corinth must have felt a bit mortified when they received the letter from the Apostle Paul calling them "people of the flesh" and "infants in Christ." Can you imagine? They were trying their best to hold their little house churches together, to follow in Jesus's footsteps as closely as possible, making sacrifices, and sharing their household income.

But Paul points to the action they've overlooked. They've been arguing about where their loyalty lies, and Paul says, "That arguing is not the action of spiritual people. Your actions indicate you're 'infants' on your faith journey." Their first instinct, like mine, must have been to say, "No. Wait! We're not infants. Look at how spiritual we've been."

But before they have a chance to go down that rabbit hole, Paul points out where their loyalty ought to lie. "People of mature faith," he explains, "understand that our true loyalty ought to lie with God." He reminds them that not even he deserves to be paid loyalty, that he and others might plant and water these communities, but it is God who actually grows them.

Similar to the letter to the Corinthians, the message delivered by Jesus, in our reading from Matthew, makes clear that checking off boxes and following the rules isn't enough. Which is exactly where I think many people get hung up. At face value, it appears both Paul and Jesus are harsh critics, who are all about the law.

In fact, in the reading a couple of weeks ago, Jesus proclaimed: "I didn't come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it." And, yet, Jesus's understanding of the law—and that would be the law of the Torah—Jesus's understanding of those commandments as a good Jew, was that those commandments are part of God's covenant with creation.

What Jesus explains in this morning's Gospel is that the commandments aren't just a list of rules to be followed, and then we're done. But that the commandments become the foundation for life-giving action. The commandments are about relationship with God and relationship with each other. So, Jesus delves into the complexities of the commandments. He explains we can't simply say, "Well, I've never murdered anyone, so I'm not a sinner." Instead we have to ask, "Have I injured someone with my anger? Have I horribly wounded someone with harsh words?"

In doing so, Jesus also declares that a mature relationship with God requires taking into account the situation, the circumstances, and the possible outcome of our actions. It's not that Jesus says, "Get rid of any laws about Sabbath," rather he says, "Come on people! Yes, protect the sabbath, but if someone is in need, don't let your adherence to the sabbath overrule your commitment to assist others."

Let me give you a very mundane example. We all know it's against the law to drive through a red light. But when we're at a red light and an ambulance or a fire truck is behind us, we roll through the light. Because we know the first responders are on their way to save lives, we make an exception.

We might say that Jesus "opens up" the commandments with a closer look at what they are really asking us to do, instead of treating them as a simple box to check-off. In this same way, we see that God's law is dynamic; as the context and, therefore, society's understanding of what is actually life-giving shifts, so do the subtleties of those commandments. Taking them at face value is what Paul would call an immature act of faith.

Now, while the Apostle Paul juxtaposes concepts like "people of the spirit" and "those of the flesh," he does so for a very specific purpose. Again, at face-value, it can seem that the message is to separate what we call the "profane" from the "sacred". When we go deeper, however, we find Paul's not saying we shouldn't have anything to do with the world, but that we ought to be cognizant of who we are being in the world.

This confusion some of us might have about the sacred being separate from the rest of the world has been top of mind for me ever since we received the results of our CAT survey. For those of you who weren't a part of that process, the CAT, or Church Assessment Tool, was a survey that gave us each the opportunity to indicate what we think is important in our shared faith journey, and what our priorities for the future might be.

The Spiritual Vitality index is one of eight measurements given compared to all the thousands of churches who have completed the survey over the years. The Spiritual Vitality index "measures the degree to which parishioners believe that their faith is central to their lives". And, while our hospitality, morale, governance and other indexes are all up in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile compared to other churches, our Spiritual Vitality index is 34%.

When some of you read that recap in our Annual Report, you might've had the same kind of response I've been talking about: "What do you mean we're not spiritual? We're plenty spiritual". In fact, when we were exploring the results at the vestry retreat last weekend, it was suggested maybe people just misunderstood the questions. But here's how that portion of the survey read:

- My spiritual experiences often impact the way I look at life.
- My spirituality is really the basis of my whole approach to life.

- I experience the presence of God in my life.
- I work to connect my faith to all the other aspects of my life.
- Although my faith is important to me, I feel there are other things more pressing in my life right now.

Pretty straightforward, right? Rather than misunderstanding the questions, I think—without realizing it—many of us have quite literally separated our lives into the sacred and the profane. We have unconsciously decided that when we're in worship or on our knees praying, that's "spiritual". But as soon as we get up from our knees or from these pews and walk out into the world, we're just living life.

No wonder we need Paul and Jesus to come up alongside of us and say, "Faith is so much more than following the rules." As it says in our reading from Sirach, if we follow the commandments—God's law—we will find life, and those life-giving outcomes are not limited to worship. When we live as spiritual people, we are aware of our spirituality infiltrating every single aspect of our lives.

So, the number one goal, that came out of our vestry retreat, is to bring greater awareness to our spirituality. You'll hear more sermons, see more classes, and hear testimonials of the way others are living their faith vs. simply contemplating their faith. Here at St. Andrew's, we do plenty to demonstrate our commitment to bring about the reign of God here on earth. But our challenge is to move past the idea that we're just doing good deeds when we help at the Food Pantry, or vote with our conscience, or help our neighbor.

Instead, my prayer is that we all realize we are being faithful disciples when we do these things. Ultimately, as Jesus and Paul both taught, our spirituality is not separate from our actions; our faith is embedded in our actions.

—AMEN