

A SINGLE MIND

Texts on Sunday, March 15, 2009

Exodus 20: 1-17; James 4: 7-8

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.

How many commandments are there? Ten? How many laws? How many rules? Six hundred some? Six thousand? A million? How about the unwritten rules? Isn't Jack supposed to take the garbage out on Wednesday evening? Mom puts dinner on the table at six? In my boyhood home, when too much squabbling broke out among the children at the dinner table, my father would in firm dark tones against which no appeal say, "The rule is in!" The rule was never stated, but when it was "in," we children had no more right to speak unless spoken to, or to ask, say, for the salt.

How many rules? How are you doing with them, anyway? Is your badding-average down there where you want it to be, maybe around 20%, 13%, maybe a little lower? Are you in a batter's slump? 0 for 4 with your boss right now, or with your wife—or *is she the boss?* How are you doing?

A lot of people think that religion is mostly about obeying the rules. Especially outside of religion people think that. You'll often hear them say that we church people are hypocrites because we judge others for not obeying our rules, but we're no better at them than anyone else. Actually, Jesus says that about church people. So does Paul. Ouch. But not judging others makes for *another* rule to obey, doesn't it? So how are you doing?

A lot of people inside the church think religion is about following the rules. I can't count the number of times I've heard a regular church goer say, "I just hope I've been good enough so the good Lord lets me into heaven when I die." Whoops! You know that that idea is pretty much the opposite of Christian faith, but a lot of Christians think it anyway. In sum, a lot of those who quit religion hated having God as a bossy parent, and a lot of those inside persist in making God their permanent parent. One way or the other, for an awful lot of people, religion is reduced to rules.

Now we're in Lent, which we are told is the season of repentance. Sit down, we're told, and think about all the ways you've broken God's commandments, and feel keenly crummy about this. In fact, give up something you enjoy so that you can feel keenly crummy about how hard it is to be happy without that nice little thing for a few weeks. Ask God fervently for strength to obey the rules better. O, dear God, — Oh dear!

Can this be true religion? This is keenly crummy religion. We already spend quite a lot of our energy thinking about ourselves! Is bearing down harder the better to blacken the mark of our soul on the white page of our imagination doing the will of God? Or is this, to use the old phrase, an invention of the devil? That is, a very clever way to keep ourself so focused on ourself that nothing really ever changes? A guilty conscience is a painful experience, to be sure, but it is totally ineffective at changing our heart. As ordinary religion decays into mere social conformity, watch out! What society needs from you is just a certain orderly predictableness willing to deliver children trained to obey traffic lights into the mouth of the economy so that they may deliver children trained to obey traffic lights into the mouth of the economy. Society evolves its patterns with no concern for you. If religion can be used to train the children to fit in, great. If not, stifle it.

I want to put a subversive thought in your ear. There is only one law. There is only one rule. There is only one commandment. I want you to try on the possibility that all your misery—now, I don't mean sorrow, but misery; sorrow is given to the heart yearning for healing in the wounds of all kinds; but misery is a word we will use for pain we choose, pain we hug to our thoughts out of neediness we do not question. Misery has the odor of our self in it; sorrow has the strange fragrance of the blood of Jesus

in it—I want you to consider that all your misery, so far as you are miserable, arises in the belief that there are many, many rules to obey, some written, some unwritten, but many, many ways to fail—and that things are not going so well with all these rules. I want to suggest to you that this miserable condition is *itself* the error for which God is come down to bring light and freedom. I want to suggest that a religion of “rules first” is a device from hell and that the Word of God to you in Christ this day is: As there is one God, there is one rule. Only one.

Wait a minute, someone says. *There are lots of traffic laws. And tax laws. And types of felonies, Even laws about how to treat the land. You want to abolish the laws and make one?* No, that’s not it. We say there are seven seas, right? Yet everyone knows there is only one ocean. The severalness of the seas comes only because we humans see the waters from so many shores. The law is like that. Beethoven said of his Ninth Symphony that he heard the whole symphony within as one chord, one sound, but to express it for others, the many notes and instruments were necessary. The law is like that.

We could examine laws in detail for hours and see how their underlying principles are few—how in their aim to protect bodies and property, traffic laws are like cousins of the commandments not to murder or steal; how some environmental laws are like honoring your father and mother, Father Sky and Mother Earth, from whom you issue in mystery. These ideas might delight and entertain you, but you want a word to light and change you. A lecture can’t do that. It is the rules in your head that make you miserable, after all, not the rules of the road. The rules that say: Get ahead. Work hard to give your family good things. Lose that weight. Stop smoking. Change yourself. Suck up to the boss. Don’t talk politics with the in-laws. Pretend things at home are all right. How can these many be one?

They are not. They are each a little god. You could say that you and I are a temple with a thousand niches in which is installed in each a little god, requiring devotions, threatening to withhold its promise unless you serve it. This is the source of our misery, a belief, a kind of religious belief, that we cannot be happy without . . . that! And that! Or that! So we run all about the temple of our self, lighting candles in hope of this little god’s pleasure, in fear of being denied that god’s protection from evil. We devote so much of our self to these lesser gods because we want the illusion that we are in control of avoiding our pain and bringing our pleasure near.

But collect yourself. You have come to church this morning, not because God is here more than elsewhere, but because you can be here, real you, if you choose, more than elsewhere. Collect yourself from the thousand niches of scattered attention. You are a living/dying woman, a living/dying man. “Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return.” So began this season, and at the vigil of Holy Saturday’s death silent tomb it will end. The only reason you have gods in a thousand niches, a thousand definitions of happiness, is that it seems life will go on, so it seems not important to pay attention now to the question, What is the one thing necessary for my happiness? There can’t be two things necessary. No, there can’t be! For if two are necessary—never mind a thousand—if two different things are both necessary, then I am a house divided. I am a civil war unto myself, and where there is war, there is no happiness. No, it must be that one thing only is necessary for my peace. Collect yourself. Come to one mind in yourself.

In Romans 14, the apostle Paul defines sin. It is the only definition of sin in the whole Bible. Elsewhere, you will find lists of bad behaviors, but no definition, and no really good explanations of what moves us to the damage we do. Paul writes, “Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” Here you are given a blade sharp and strong enough to separate you from the confusion of many gods whenever you choose to cut with it. For if faith is the question—trust that your life is already all right, that your eternal is already established in God and the proof of it is your hope, your trust—if faith and trust in God is the question in every choice you make, and if sin is just that awesome name we have for what we did

when we did not trust the eye of God to give what is needful, but took what we saw in order to shut down our hunger, cover our hurt—then there can come some peace about our past. For we see, in sorrow, but not misery, the story of how we doubted and despaired that the goodness of God would come in time; how in our fear, we swore at our beloved, or tried to buy our way to happiness, or went for comforts where only pain would finally flow; or whatever thousand things we did. We can see these things strangely well, and even peacefully, in the shadow of the Cross where we collect ourself. And then there can come some hope, a kind of power in our present as we draw near to God and God draws near to us. Our hearts are purified, simplified of double-mindedness, released from fearing two gods, or ten, or a thousand rules and laws. Here is one commandment only, whenever I collect myself, remember myself: *What is the way of trust in the goodness of God?* Not: What is the path of no fear? No, fear is not going away altogether. Not: What is the way of no sorrow? Suffering is given to those who love. But what is the way to trust without taking what is not given? What is the way of trust that enables you to see what shall be yours and what shall not?

The gift of the power of relinquishment: to cease a fight in the middle of remembering who you are; to impose a hard punishment on a child who needs correction, in the middle of remembering who you are and what you are here for; to let go the reins of your fear, or your career, in the middle of being called to remember who you are.

What of all those rules, broken and followed, and what of all that guilt when you see that you for many years feared and despaired, and did not trust? Here too, let go. Here too, choose trust. Hold back from punishing yourself. Make amends freely, as if all Eternity were watching. Accept consequences; they do not touch your happiness, your trust. See how you stand before the Eternal. Give thanks for this extraordinary gift of God. See this and rejoice, as God rejoices that one of God's creatures stands, not bound by rules, but free and standing before one God, a single mind.

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