

Sermon – Sunday, February 12, 2023

Deacon Martha

For we are God's servants, working together

Sitting criss-cross applesauce on my rug remnant (not something I could easily accomplish these days), helping to complete the circle comprised of a dozen three and four- year-olds in the pre-school room of Y summer camp, I asked, "Who can give me a rule?" Of course, rule number one would always be about raising you hand and being called on before blurting out an answer, so that didn't count. This ritual was repeated every morning once everyone had arrived and we began our daily routine. I don't recall just how many rules there were, but they were simple, basic aides in teaching/learning how to get along with one another by being caring and respectful. Having accomplished this exercise, we could get on with the morning activities of singing, arts and crafts, and listening to the story that was read by one of the class leaders. When it was time to go outdoors, rules being followed, students lined up in pairs to walk through the hallway and down the flight of stairs and outside. Sounds neat and orderly, doesn't it? But we all know, there are slip-ups...someone didn't keep his or her hands to themselves, another wanted to be first in line, someone else forgot that running down the hallway was a no-no....

Today's readings seem to have a lot to do with rules or commandments. But maybe there's something else?

In the reading today from Deuteronomy Moses is speaking to the people before they (not he) enter the Promised Land. He tells them, Choose Life. How could they do that? By following God's plan, by loving the Lord their God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments.

The "rules" we hear read in today's Gospel, certainly are much more complex, stark, demanding than those that a pre-school class would recite and do their best to follow. You have heard it said...Jesus starts with what his hearers know and that to which they can relate. Jesus takes it a step further when he adds, But I Say to You...in doing this He helps his listeners understand it isn't simply about following rules. Choosing to be a follower requires a commitment to relationships not merely checking off one's righteousness on a list of prohibitions...nope, didn't murder anybody today; no, no affair; swearing falsely? Don't recall slandering my neighbor; of course, we are to abide by these commandments but not simply so that we don't pay a consequence...but doing so out of love for God, neighbor and self.

Paul reminds us that the one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose and that we are God's servants, working together. In preparing this sermon, I came across this writing. "We can choose to nurture our divides and remain in a state of tension and dissension, or we may decide to be open to the Spirit and focus on that which unites us, God's love for humanity, and work together through our disagreements. And isn't this what we are encouraged to do in today's reading from Corinthians?

Is anyone familiar with a Rule of Life? It occurred to me as I thought about the readings, the concepts and ideologies do represent a Rule of Life. For most of us today, reading all the dos and don'ts, can and cannots, written in the Book of Deuteronomy and endeavoring to live by them would be mind boggling, mind numbing and impossible. We'd probably be "sinning" an awful lot! One's Rule of Life need not be that complex. It isn't about a detailed to-do list that must be maintained. Instead, it gives one an opportunity to prayerfully discern what roles and responsibilities the Lord has given them, which in turn, allows for spiritual growth and closer fellowship. In part, the definition of A Rule of Life is an intentional, conscious plan to keep God at the center of everything we do and it has a rich history in Christian tradition. It has been traced back to the early monastic movement in the fourth century with the most well-known Rule written by Benedict in the sixth century. There are many others.

As Lent approaches, if you're inclined, I invite you to explore the idea of creating a Rule of Life. You may want to follow a guide that is already written or you might prayerfully compose something that fits you more personally. No one's life circumstance is the same and the basic elements can be tailored to reflect your responsibilities.

Whether or not the idea of establishing a Rule of Life works for you, we've been given instruction, life-giving, life-saving, instruction.

To paraphrase one author: The divine law isn't about taking away diversity and restricting creativity; it is about encouraging expansive living, protecting all people in their quest, choosing life not only for oneself, but for others as well, through actions that respect all of creation. It's about choosing the way of the One who created all life, who sees all life, loves all life, who forgives and renews all life. In doing so, together, we can face the challenges before us with a sense of hope and courage. Amen