

Guarding the Ways of Life
Sixth Sunday After Epiphany
February 12, 2017
Jill R. Russell

Texts: Deuteronomy 30.15-20;
Psalm 119.1-8;
1 Corinthians 3.1-9;
Matthew 5.21-37

As I was thinking about this sermon for today an old friend from my seminary days came to mind. Ben was a fellow RCA seminary student studying a non-RCA seminary. So we met in a summer seminar on Reformed Worship for students like ourselves. I went to hear him preach once at a small church where he served as the part-pastor during seminary. It was a great sermon but a strange beginning. He began by telling us a joke. It had nothing to do with the sermon. I asked him about it later and he said he always starts with a joke to warm up the crowd. Needless to say, I have not adopted his practice but today I was tempted because it feels important to me that we find some ways to laugh together.

It's been an intense time. Many of us are in vigilance mode watching the national scene, tracking the local impacts, and trying to make a difference. Others of us aren't as in tune with all of that because the demands of our personal life of family or health or relationship is all consuming. Regardless of the cause it takes a toll being on high alert all the time constantly triggering your sympathetic nervous system to put you into "fight or flight" mode. And laughter calms that part of the nervous system and makes some space for the parasympathetic system to do its work of calming and relaxing the body and mind.

So in honor of the Rev. Dr. Benjamin Doolittle I was going to tell a joke today but then I remembered that I can't tell a joke to save my life. I tried at Brim Bunch when I was hosting a few months back but it completely bombed. Before you cast aspirations on their sense of humor, you have to know that I told the joke wrong the first time...I really am that bad!

So I was delighted to learn in my reading about this that laughter works because it does the same thing as deep breathing. Since I wasn't confident I

could get your rolling in the aisles with laughter, I decided I could get you to breath with me.

We should do this for a full five minutes. We're just going to do three connected breaths but it needs to be a particular kind of breathing. You want your exhale to be longer than your inhale; this is key for the parasympathetic system. Breath in through the nose for a count of 2. Hold for a count of 1. Then exhale through the mouth for a count of 4.

If you do this for five minutes, you can move into the "rest and digest" mode. We're all familiar with the "fight of flight" description for the sympathetic system. It was newer language for me - this "rest and digest" description - for what happens in our bodies when the parasympathetic system is doing its work.

You may be wondering, as I did at my friend Ben's sermon, what in the world does this have to do with the texts for this day? I'm going there right now and it is connected. On the surface - on the first hearing - this sermon from Moses to the Hebrew people on the edge of the promised land is the stuff that anxiety is made of: "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity."¹ If your sympathetic system wasn't already on - if you didn't already feel anxious about the stakes of what is happening in your life and in the world - Deuteronomy will help with that! Life and death. Those are the choices before us.

And Jesus is right there with Moses ratcheting up the stakes: "You have heard that it was said... 'You shall not murder'But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or a sister you are liable to judgment..."² He does this with each of the commandments: murder, adultery, swearing oaths. With each new command the intensity of the consequences for failure get amped up.

If you let these passages blow over you in an already heightened state of vigilance, these texts can become fodder for an even deeper sense of dread and fear. Especially if you hear these texts as a simplistic cause and effect. Follow the commands of God and life will go well for you. Make any mistakes and it's all over.

¹ Deuteronomy 31.15, NRSV

² Matthew 5.21-22 excerpted, NRSV

There is an appeal to viewing life in such simple and mechanical terms. If what we get from scripture is a set of rules to follow, then we can master that. In fact, we can do more than master it. We can begin to manipulate it to our own advantage. That's precisely what Jesus is calling out in the Sermon on the Mount: the ways that people had played games with these commands, creating loop holes and work arounds until the spirit of the law had been completely lost as people played games with the letter of the law. If you are in the mode of thinking of law as a set of external rules you can check off to ensure you that you get the good stuff and avoid the bad stuff, then Jesus' teaching here and his increasingly alarming language is going to shock you out of that mode. Because the way Jesus is talking about the law is going to make it impossible for you to ever check off any one let alone all of those boxes.

What happens if we go back to hear the text from a different place. Not from a heightened sense of fear but from a grounded place of trust.

What if we listen to Deuteronomy not as a finger-wagging lecture on responsibility or some threatening sermon designed to induce blind obedience?

What if we remember the story that stands behind this sermon – what someone I was reading this week called the “implied theological narrative³” behind this text?

What if we remember a story about God's fierce, loyal love for the Hebrew people – a love that does not let go – a God who is moved by our suffering to bring about our freedom and liberation?

What if we hold this truth in that deep and settled place inside of us so that what stands out to us from this text is verse 20 with the invitation to love and obey God and to hold fast to God -- that even when the road ahead is uncertain and the choices don't feel simple at all -- we will love and hold fast to God?

³ Robert P. Hoch, *New Proclamation: Year A 2011 Advent through Holy Week* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 108.

What if we heard Jesus not trying to scare or shame us into a fearful obedience but instead hear him as describing the lengths to which we should go to guard these ways of life that the commandments point us toward: dealing with anger in constructive ways; doing everything we can to fix relationships that are strained and broken; honoring the beauty and sacred power of human sexuality and therefore to honor people with both our thoughts and our body; and to hold as sacred the commitments we make and keep?

What if we heard the escalating intensity of Jesus' images as describing the "passion of our repentance"⁴ not because we fear God's retribution but because we know how good these ways of life truly are and we will do anything to tack back toward them after we fall away?

So today I want to offer to you as I did for the children today a practice that you might take with you as one reminder to help guard these ways of life. It's not a list of rules but a way to hold fast to God or maybe more accurately to help you notice the ways in which God is holding fast to you.

At the end of each pew there are some prayer cards behind the fellowship pad. I invite you to take those right now and pass them there should be enough for one for every household. On it are two practices of prayer (see below). One is an evening prayer that we used during the Season of Reconciliation book study that comes from the Iona community. I have been using it for several weeks and I hope it is a gift you as it has been to me. On the other side is a prayer I just received recently from the Red Cord Community. It's a prayer especially for those moment when you feel yourself struggling to bring compassion to a person or situation.

Take these with you, set them where you can see them. Even if you don't use the prayers themselves just the sight of it can serve to remind us of this call to choose life...to choose life every single day, every hour, every moment.

⁴ This idea "passion of our repentance" came from the same article referenced earlier.

EVENING PRAYERS

From *Iona Abbey Worship Book*, A Simple Evening Liturgy

Peace on each one who comes in need,
Peace on each one who comes in joy.

silence

Peace on each one who offers prayers,
Peace on each one who offers song.
Peace of the maker, peace of the Son,
Peace of the Spirit, the triune One.

The Christ Candle is lit --- breathe deeply for several minutes

O God, for your love for us, warm and brooding,
which has brought us to birth and opened our eyes
to the wonder and beauty of creation,
We give you thanks.

For your love for us, wild and freeing,
which has awakened us to the energy of creation:
the sap that flows,
the blood that pulses,
the heart that sings.
We give you thanks.

For your love for us, compassionate and patient,
which has carried us through our pain,
wept beside us in our sin,
and waited with us in our confusion.
We give you thanks.

For your love for us, strong and challenging,
which has called us to risk for you,
asked for the best in us,
and shown us how to serve.
We give you thanks.

O God we come to celebrate
that your Holy Spirit is present deep within us,
and at the heart of all life.
Forgive us when we forget your gift of love
made known to us in Jesus,
and draw us into your presence this night, Amen.

PRAYER OF THE HEART

An email from Lorilyn Wiering of Red Cord Community

You can sign up to receive these emails by making a request to lorilyn@redcordcommunity.org

The threat and experience of my own disorientation and fragmentation these days is very real. And I am encountering many others who are scattered, experiencing shut-down, or who have become the perpetrators of violence toward their enemies, who may often be family members. Are you experiencing this too?

More than ever, we need to both receive and become outpourings of compassion. The Sacred Heart of Jesus is the source of that compassion. This week practicing the Prayer of the Heart is helping me to live as a conduit of compassion.

Here's what that looks like for me. Last year I downloaded and printed a black and white copy of a 14th century Mexican retablo of the Sacred Heart. I colored, mounted and mod podged this photocopy. With this image before me, I light a candle and follow these instructions offered by Fr. Richard Rohr:

Next time a resentment, negativity or irritation comes to mind, and you are tempted to play it out or attach to it, instead move that thought or person into your heart space – literally. There, surround this negativity with silence (which is much easier to do in the heart) and your pumping blood (which will often feel warm like coals). In this place, it is almost impossible to comment, judge, create story lines, or remain antagonistic. You are in a place that does not create or feed on contraries, but is the natural organ of life, embodiment and love. Love lives and thrives in the heart space. The “sacred heart” is then your heart too.

I invite you to practice this prayer too. Even more than right thinking, our world needs right relationship. And that begins in nurturing our own heart in God.

With love to each of you,
Lorilyn