

Basic Lessons of Life ~ August 31, 2008

Exodus 3:1-15; Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28; Psalm 119:33-40

In the simple act of living we learn a lot of lessons that help us survive. As babies we discover that when we yowl loud enough and long enough we will be fed or cuddled or comforted in some way. As young children we learn how letters fit together to form words and we discover the pleasure of being able to read. We also learn basic math, which is an initial building block for those of us who are able to move forward into the more advanced stuff. We might discover the laws of nature as we move along—laws that continually reveal themselves if we are observant.

If we have parents who think that practicing a form of religion is an important part of being well-rounded humans, we will receive basic grounding in one religious system or another or, in our cases, in one way of viewing Christianity or another. I believe that we are fortunate if we have such well-meaning parents, because there is much to be gained through a basic knowledge of religion. As we grow older we often need the lessons such a structure gives us to lead successful and fulfilling lives.

In all of our scripture readings for this morning, we discover basic lessons that remind us of who we are as Christians and how we need to operate in life if we are the followers of Jesus.

Understanding that Christianity is an offshoot of Judaism, we find that the story of Moses, encountering the burning bush and hearing God tell him that God will be with him through all the challenges of life, is important for us, also.

We might not have to face Pharaoh and lead a huge number of people through the wilderness to the promised land, as Moses did, but there will be times when we have to face difficult trials and tribulations and it should be a comfort to us to know that there is a source beyond ourselves and within ourselves that will help us do so. Over and over again we are reminded that this is so in the pages of our Bible. A sustaining and supporting force is with us, we are never left alone.

Jesus tried to tell his disciples this when he told them of the times that were before him. He was telling them that they would be facing life alone, without his daily physical presence. He reminded those closest to him that they needed to give up their old ways of living if they were to nurture the new way he had been showing them--the way God had shown him. He reminded them that things of this earth were not what would sustain them through difficulty. They needed to look to the divine and not to human measures of success and strength. Even if they gained everything that seemed important in the human realm, they would lose the true essence of life.

In Romans, Paul's most theological work, we find basic rules spelled out clearly. Paul tells us to "let love be genuine and hate what is evil." If love is the ruling factor in the message of Christ, it must be genuine. We all can tell when someone tells us they love us with no true depth of feeling or spirit. After a while we come to understand that such superficial love is phony. It is not the love that "believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things." This genuine love is the kind we hope to receive and that we need to return. Genuine affection is to be cherished and returned.

Paul also reminds us to be patient when times are tough and to persevere. There are difficult times that come along when we would all like to give up and run away. Surprisingly, most do not. We choose, instead, to “screw our courage to the sticking point,” confront our trouble and move on through it. Paul understood that the early Christians would face times of persecution and death that would threaten the way they were living. He knew they needed encouragement to journey on.

We are also to provide hospitality to strangers—to view everyone as equally valuable—no matter who they are or where they are in life. When we do this we find ourselves living in peace and allowing God to be the judge of others. If someone does something that is mean to us, we are not to find a way to return the favor. God will handle that.

We need to always focus on doing good and we will find that good returns to us. It might take a while, but it will happen. There is a little story about the famous pianist Ignace Paderewski that reminds us of the way in which a kind action can lead to more positive results.

Paderewski agreed to play a concert organized by two Stanford University students working their way through school. His manager said they would have to guarantee the artist a fee of \$2,000. The boys agreed and eventually the concert was held.

Though the two student promoters worked hard, they took in only \$1,600. Discouraged, they told the pianist of their efforts and handed him the \$1,600 with a note promising to pay him the balance of \$400. But the artist tore up the note and gave them back the \$1,600. "Take your expenses out of this," he said, "give yourselves each 10% of what's left for your work, and let me have the rest."

Years later, Paderewski was faced with feeding the people of his war-ravaged Poland. Amazingly, even before a request was made, thousands of tons of food were sent to Poland by the United States.

He later traveled to Paris to thank Herbert Hoover, who headed up the US relief effort. "That's all right, Mr. Paderewski," said Hoover, "I knew that the need was great. And besides, though you may not remember it, I was one of two college students whom you generously helped when I was in need."

The story illustrates a law of successful living: sooner or later we will reap what we sow. Paderewski reaped a harvest of kindness he had sown years before. Those who sow love will eventually reap love.

Those who sow goodness will reap even more. Those who sow fear and mistrust will reap an unwanted harvest later. (Steve Goodier: www.lifesupport.com)

The choice is always up to us. We have the ability to decide which way our lives will go. If we decide to heed the lessons of love and perseverance and patience our faith holds for us, we will discover the lives of abundance Jesus came to help us find. Amen