

Keepers or Doers or Both?

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23 ; Psalm 15 9-03-06

In the book of Deuteronomy, one of the books of the Hebrew Pentateuch, the Law, there are many rules and regulations. Moses provides a bit of commentary in this morning's reading as he tries once again to engage the nation Israel in God's ongoing plan for it. His hope is that not only those who hear his words will begin to obey, but that they will help their children grow up abiding by the law God had given them.

The Israelites were an unruly bunch, unhappy at wandering in the wilderness with no goal clearly spelled out for them and no end to their journey in sight. They did not totally trust Moses who had gotten them into this mess claiming he had heard and understood the Word of God. This was not the life they had imagined for themselves and their families but it was the life they had been handed and all they could do was go on—there was no return to Egypt for them. Moses was urging them to become doers of the law given them and not hearers only.

The law has remained important for followers of Judaism to this day, at least for those who are Orthodox in their belief system. Years ago I met an attorney who was and is a present day carrier of the laws and faith of his people. I did not know this when I first met him and, since we were on opposite sides, I regarded him with initial suspicion. This was dispelled one day as we sat at a table negotiating a few things and he simply said: "Micah 6:8." I looked up from whatever it was I was reading and said, "Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God. One of my favorites." At that moment we knew each other and respected one another and even though we came from different, yet similar, faith traditions, we found common ground which we still hold today as people.

In our faith tradition, which came from his, Jesus tells us that the law is important but not always so binding that it cannot be bent or even set aside. The little discussion about his disciples eating before washing their hands points to this. "It doesn't matter if something impure gets into their systems," he says. "What matters is what comes out."

We have filters within our beings and we can take whatever it is that flies around us, process it and refine it so that it comes out as something that is worthy of us. We are all exposed to pollutants to our souls. The best we can do is make sure we are not poisoned by them and that they do not effect our lives and the lives of those around us. We manage to avoid spewing out negative thoughts by using the filter of the teachings of Christ.

Back to the law. Jesus told us to "render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's." If we do not obey the laws of the state, meant to keep order and to give society some form, there will be trouble. But, he also knew that the letter of the law was often too harsh and interpretation needed to be made based on the spirit of the same law. This freedom to interpret is especially dear to the hearts of Congregationalists who believe that it is up to each and every individual to interpret the Word of God using wisdom and conscience and then apply it to our lives. Jesus taught us to give heed to the law of the state and of God but to remember that all people are human and that there are times when laws are made to be broken. Wisdom and caution need to be exercised when we choose to think this way.

Of course, the little Letter of James points to the necessity of doing good works. Not just listening to the words and directions for living given us by Christ, but actually putting those words into action. Without the action, the words are dead.

This was a great theological battle in the days of the early Christians. Paul insisted that all one needed was grace; James insisted that good works were needed to help the grace along. People still debate this. Where each of us comes down in this discussion depends on our religious background. I was raised in a church that believed in the value of being a doer of the word. Action was needed.

This did not mean that we should forget the laws and teachings of our faith, just act on them to help make the world a better place for all people. Jesus taught people that it was important to reach out to one another and to help others face the ups and downs, joys and sorrows of life. While keeping the law was important, relationships were the tie that helps keep all people together. Not only our relationships with one another but our relationships with God. Those relationships are personal and between us and our Maker.

This morning, as we prepare to take into our beings the elements of communion and with them the nature of Christ, we follow a mandate, commandment, law of his, to “do this in remembrance of me.”

A lovely little song by Buryl Red and Ragan Courtney reminds us of this commandment while telling us how to be doers of the Word:

**In Remembrance
by Ragan Courtney and Buryl Red**

In remembrance of Me eat this bread
In remembrance of Me drink this wine
In remembrance of Me pray for the time
When God’s own will is done

In remembrance of me heal the sick
In remembrance of me feed the poor
In remembrance of me open the door
And let your brother in, let him in

Take eat and be comforted
Drink and remember too
That this is my body and precious blood
Shed for you, shed for you

In remembrance of me always love
In remembrance of me don’t look above
But look in your heart, look in your heart
Look in your heart for God

Do this in remembrance of Me
Do this in remembrance of Me
In remembrance of Me

Amen