

Meditation Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46 10-2-05

As I was wrestling around with the scripture readings for this morning, rules and regulations were all I could think about. This was a hard topic to avoid as I considered the Ten Commandments handed to Moses on those stone tablets. It was even more difficult when I considered the life of Paul, one that had been lived in accordance with the many rules and regulations of Judaism before he came across the teachings of Jesus and decided to follow him.

It had taken Paul a while to realize that life was not tied up in books of rules that had to be followed to the letter to be successful in one's calling. If rules were foolish they needed to be set aside to accomplish what it was that needed doing. In seeking to spread the gospel of Christ, as he understood it, Paul needed to be free. He found his freedom in Christ, a freedom that urged him to pursue a higher calling than that of a card-carrying, law-quoting Pharisee. He discovered that the spirit of the law was what mattered most as he went about his mission to Jews and Gentiles alike.

There were about 613 rules that a devout Jew needed to follow. The Ten Commandments were the major rules and the rest, when read carefully, seemed to spin from those. Some of the rules were meant to keep people healthy, some were to keep them obedient to Judaism and some were meant to point the way to a relationship with God.

The teachings of Jesus, who had grown up an observant Jew, always pointed toward the way to achieve a close relationship with God. That is why he set aside so many rules and regulations as he walked through life. The essence of religion for him, as it should be for us, was to find the way to have the closest walk with God possible. That was his goal as it should be ours. Jesus' intent was not to control others but to set them free to become all that they could be.

The little parable that came from Matthew in this morning's reading, shows people taking action who were bound by no rules or regulations, by no sense of obligation or love. They certainly broke the commandment, which says, "Thou shalt not kill," several times.

The landowner, who we understand to be God, sent the prophets of long ago to tell people the right way to live but they ignored the prophets and found them so annoying that they even killed several of them. So another batch of prophets was sent forth, including John the Baptist. John was murdered for his outspokenness and refusal to budge from his firmly held principles. So at last, God sent his Son and he was put to death, also.

In this parable, Jesus was issuing a warning to those who could hear and who sought to understand, that he was going to his death at the hands of those who refused to hear or understand the message God was trying to send through him. He was the new covenant mentioned by the prophet Jeremiah. This new covenant was to be written on hearts and not on stone tablets. It was to dwell within us and help us know God and God's will for us.

The principles of loving God with all one's heart and mind and strength and soul and one's neighbor as one's self were to be the center of Christ's message. Evidently that message had not gotten through to those who rented the land. That message did not take center stage. Greed did. Greediness to maintain the old system--greediness to get the Son's inheritance. The inability to reach out and grow into something better killed the spirit within each of them and allowed them to strike down another.

This is Worldwide Communion Sunday, a day on which we celebrate our one-ness with Christians all around the world. A oneness rooted in the life and teachings of Christ and in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life. We may vary by denomination, but, as I like to say, “The content is the same, while the format differs.” We all have, as the basis of our faith, Christ. In an ideal world this would be enough to unite us as Christians. But, it seems some lose sight of this simple guiding principle and decide that their particular brand of Christianity is the one and only one that should exist. If we remembered that we have been told that, “In my Father’s house there are many rooms...” we would know that there is a place for each and everyone of us and there would be no limit to the good we could accomplish together.

As we make ready to celebrate the sacrament this morning we need to reflect on how taking the elements, the bread and the wine, make us part of the larger body of Christ. We also need to reflect on how, when we take the elements, we take a part of Christ symbolically into ourselves. A part that is meant to nurture us and help us grow into better imitations of the way he lived and moved and had his being. If we take the time to think for a few moments of what life would have been for us without the guiding light we see in Jesus, we will understand more fully the wonderful gift God has given us and the world. A gift that has taken us beyond words chiseled in stone to words written on our hearts that we are to share with all others in our troubled world.

Amen