

What Does it Take? Deuteronomy 18:15-20; I Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28; Psalm 111 1-29-06

As Christians, practicing a religion, which is based on many relationships, we are forced to ask ourselves a lot of questions. Our relationships are those with God through Christ and with the people with whom we come in contact.

Our human relationships can some times drive us a little batty when we try to help people see that the presence of God is a good thing in their lives. This is particularly difficult when people say that “there really is no God.” We sometimes wonder if there is any way we can provide a convincing argument about God’s existence. It would be easy if God left footprints or would come thundering down into our midst proclaiming to be the great “I am.” This does not happen in our world.

So we must wonder, those of us who believe and who reflect on our religion at all: What does it take to help us help one another recognize the presence of the God above, within and among us? This most likely is a question that comes right after the one that asks how it is possible that we can achieve a more Christ-like life, one in which we more fully reveal what it is we have been called to do with our lives. The two questions are intertwined as we can see in this morning’s scripture readings.

In Deuteronomy, God raised up a prophet for the people at their own request. They did not want to hear the voice of God or have to look at the fire of God, which blazed before them so brightly in the wilderness. A new approach was requested and was granted in the hopes that the nation Israel would actually listen to one raised up from their midst. As we know, by reading the stories in the Old Testament, the prophets were often given a very tough time by those they tried to lead.

Once in a while a prophet would rebel, as did Jonah when he refused to go to Ninevah and tried to flee from God. If we recall the story of that reluctant prophet, we will remember that he found himself in the belly of a whale or large fish after being tossed overboard by his distressed shipmates. He did relent and finally did what God asked and went to Ninevah. The town repented of its sins and God’s wrath was turned away. Being the contrarian that he was Jonah, felt terribly depressed by this. Most other prophets would have been overjoyed, but, as we all know, “it takes all kinds to make a world.” That goes for God’s prophets, also. Jonah, we are told, moped around about Ninevah’s survival until God had a little chat with him reminding him of who it was that was in charge.

God believed it would take a prophet or two or a dozen or so to lead his chosen people in the pathways of righteousness and faith. As always, some followed while others would not.

Sometimes we might have the very best of intentions in promising to lead a more Christ-like life. We might even heed the words of God’s prophets but we are easily swayed by others. Paul saw this happening all around him as he tried to build little churches that would nurture the faith and that would succeed in spreading the good news of Christ. In this morning’s reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians, we find Paul addressing a matter that does not make a lot of sense to us in our day and age. However, if we move beyond the issue of people eating meat that had been offered to idols, we discover that there is relevance for us in his words and thought process.

Paul was telling those early Christians that they should not do anything that might cause a brother or sister in Christ to fall short of their goal in becoming better disciples. In this instance it was a matter of “appearing” to follow false gods instead of the one true God by dining at the tables in temples dedicated to other gods. Those strong in the faith believed they could do so and incur no alienation in their faith. Paul warned that this might lead others who were weaker to think they might do the same with no injury to themselves. These weaker followers might then be caught in the snare of worshipping lesser gods. This would be a major stumbling block that some might not be able to climb over or go around.

We, too, sometimes put stumbling blocks in the pathway of our fellow followers of Christ. We forget that we are to serve as good examples for others. Through reflecting the light of the life and teachings of Jesus.

Edgar Guest wrote a little poem speaking of this quest to be a positive light in the world. His words:

I have to live with myself and so
 I want to be fit for myself to know,
 I want to be able as days go by,
 Always to look myself in the eye;
 I don't want to stand, with the setting sun,
 And hate myself for the things I've done.
 I want to go out with my head erect,
 I want to deserve all men's respect;
 But here in the struggle for fame and pelf,
 I want to be able to look at myself,
 I don't want to look at myself and know
 That I'm bluster and bluff and empty show.
 I can never hide myself from me:
 I see what others may never see;
 I know what others may never know;
 I can never fool myself and so,
 Whatever happens I want to be
 Self-respecting and conscience free.

We can never fool ourselves into thinking we are what we are not without suffering the consequences of our illusions. Whenever we are untrue to our basic nature we fail at what it is we do and we take those who watch and admire us right with us. Every time we do little things that we know are not the way and the will of God we create those little stumbling blocks for one another that Paul always warned against. And we all do this knowingly and unknowingly. Paul urged those early followers to set aside themselves and their desires out of love and concern for others that all might discover the way, the truth and the life.

So along with listening to the prophets of God, we have a responsibility to others to help them seek and find the right way to travel through this earthly life. We have a responsibility to make the way more straight and smooth and even for those who follow. We are to walk in the way of Christ and provide the same example for those around us as he did.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus appeared in the temple and preached with authority, not as the scribes, we are told, but, as one called by God to speak for God. He not only taught but he also healed people who were suffering. Those humans who were around him could not quite comprehend just who he was. But many saw the way he was. They saw his concern and care for those who came to him for help. They saw his compassion and they heard his words. They saw his accepting, inclusive nature. Those who followed him learned there was nothing glamorous about the task, it was just plain hard work. Those who could handle it stayed with him, those who could not walked or ran away. Even after some ran they returned and carried on his mission modeling themselves on the way he lived and moved and had his being.

That's what we are supposed to do with our lives. If you are anything like me, you have a distance to go. But, there is always a new minute, new hour, a day when we can begin again and discover just what it takes to renew our connection to God and our fellow humans through the example of Christ. Amen