

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

Sunday, July 11, 2010

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

Proper 10C 2010

In the Name of our one living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's Gospel lesson starts off with a lawyer challenging Jesus. As a former lawyer, I'm a little protective so I should point out that the man is actually a scribe, a person who is an expert in interpreting the Mosaic Law. Jesus has been teaching his own views on the Law.

Try to visualize the scene. Here is Jesus, a carpenter's son from a poor town in the sticks, who is probably not dressed too well and speaks with a regional accent, talking about the Law. The educated scribe comes upon Jesus and wonders who is this guy that he should be talking about the Law! The learned scribe is now trying to challenge Jesus' authority and expertise. The scribe poses a question that doesn't make sense. He asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" In my experience the decision to give or not give an inheritance is entirely the decision of the donor not the beneficiary. However, the fact that the lawyer asks this question gives us an insight into his mind and the assumptions he makes.

Can anyone "earn" an inheritance? Especially from the God who created all? Apparently this scribe thinks so. That is how he reads the Law. If I do A, B, and C then I deserve (through my own efforts) to receive D, E and F! I don't know about you, but I have found that life has a lot more variables than that.

The parable sets up the question of whether the Law is the Gospel or whether the Gospel is the Law. From the question he asks, it seems likely that the lawyer thinks the Law is the Gospel. Learned in the Law, he assumes that the Law is the path to eternal life. To him the path is certain and the result within his own control. To him, obedience to the law is proof of righteousness in the eyes of God.

Knowing his intent and the illogic of the question, Jesus answers the question with a question, “What does the Law say?” Quoting Deuteronomy and Leviticus, the lawyer answers correctly. But if he is in control, he better not make any mistakes. He better get it right! So he asks a follow-up question, “Who is my neighbor?” How do you answer a question like that? Jesus doesn’t try. Instead he tells the well-known story of the Good Samaritan.

The preschool kids love this story when I tell it in chapel. And they easily grasp the moral that one should be kind and helpful to those in trouble. But is that all there is to the parable – be a good Boy Scout or Girl Scout? While that is good behavior and I want the kids to learn that, I think there is more to the parable than this. It has to be viewed in the context of the challenge the lawyer is posing to Jesus.

The robbed man is almost certainly a Jew since he is going from Jerusalem down to Jericho. He is also an innocent victim since he was attacked by robbers. The first two men to arrive on the scene would raise expectations among the listeners that they would help him – a priest and a Levite who assists the priests at the Temple. But they walked right by. Why? They, of all people, should have helped. The only explanation would be that they were afraid he might be dead and they’d be defiled under the Law by touching him. A Samaritan, a people hated and reviled by the Jews,

passes by and does the unexpected not only by stopping but by giving the man excellent care. Jesus says he was “moved by pity” – what we call compassion.

Jesus now moves for the kill – he asks, “Which of the three was the neighbor to the man?” Notice the answer. The lawyer can’t bring himself to say “the Samaritan”. Instead he replies, “The one who showed him mercy.” The lawyer is forced to give the answer to his own question – and it is one that challenges all his assumptions and his underlying belief system – about the Law, about his own identity, and about the “other”. No wonder he couldn’t even utter the word, “Samaritan”.

The story Jesus tells is one of compassion – of being able to see in the other the same humanity that we ourselves inhabit. I think it arises from an awareness of the love of God who loved us all into being. It is a story about being a neighbor and not about who is a neighbor. It is the story that puts the Gospel as the law rather than the other way around. It is the story of the most unlikely person being able to say, “the love of God in me sees the love of God in you” and then able to act out that wisdom.

Holding that the Law is the Gospel is tempting. It creates certainty. It gives us the sense of being in control of our own fate. It gives one the sense that we know Good from Evil and thus a sense of righteousness. But there is a downside. If the Law is Gospel, then we have to follow the rules. But the Law has to be interpreted by humans to fit new or different situations. We thus find ourselves following human traditions and interpretations in order to justify ourselves. The lawyer in Jesus’ parable excelled in this. This is what Jesus refuted in the parable. For Jesus it is about ethics and compassion – not legalisms.

When we live viewing the Gospel as Law, we find the path less certain. We find more questions than answers. Often we may feel like we aren't sure where we are going. We can only rely on grace – the knowledge of God's love and goodness. We have to have and to see that within ourselves in order to see it in others. In our Gospel lesson, the lawyer comes to realize that he is the one who is being challenged rather than being the challenger. He is forced to recognize that pity, compassion, kindness – call it what you will – is our best guide. He can't get out the word "Samaritan" but he got the point. That's a start.

This is a parable for our times, especially in Hawaii this week with the veto by the Governor of House Bill 444, which provided for civil unions. In many ways it is the same theological controversy being played out. Civil unions is the presenting issue, but underneath it are really two very different ways of thinking about the world and how the world should work. The heat being generated is not just about civil unions, but also about where people feel safe, where they feel good about themselves, where they feel like they are in control. People on both sides are being authentic about how they feel and what they think. In such a situation, rational discussion is not possible. It is for that reason that I think the Governor's position that this is a topic for a public vote is constitutionally, politically and – most importantly – ethically unsound especially when it involves a minority group.

It is a sad truth that the persecution of the Jews for centuries in Europe was wholeheartedly approved of by the majority and by the Church. It is a sad truth that slavery and, later, the Jim Crow laws were heartily supported by the white majority and by many churches. Today, as in those days, these kinds of disputes can tools to be used for political or economic advantage.

Our lesson from the Old Testament is from the Book of Amos. It is a very uncomfortable Book to read because it challenges our belief or hope that we always have a “get out of jail card” when it comes to God. God has called Amos, a poor farmer, to up to the Northern Kingdom of Israel and tell the truth to King Jeroboam – that God has had it with them, It was a time when the Kingdom was rich and politically safe. It was also a time when there was rampant corruption and injustice. The powerful were living well at the expense of the poor. While the ceremonies of the Law were being observed, there was no justice, no mercy. It was all about power. They had fooled themselves into thinking they were in control, that what they had was theirs by right and that their power justified them.

I think both lessons can be read in the context of our current situation. We fight about power rather than solve problems. We see issues and categories rather than people. We despoil the environment to make money and feed our need for oil. There are probably more lobbyists in Washington than schoolteachers. We see our wants instead of the world’s needs. We see the “Other” rather than our common humanity.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus shifted the lawyer’s view of the world and himself from the Law and righteousness to ethics: “What is the right thing to do? What is the kind thing to do?” This shifts us from thinking about ourselves to thinking about God. It shifts us from certainty and tradition to relying on grace to lead us. It shifts us from fear to trust.

To one extent or another, we are all in the same situation as the lawyer was. Can we move ourselves to at least say “the one who had pity on him” even if we can’t yet have the courage to say Samaritan? Maybe that nameless admission of ethics founded in God’s love will be redemption enough. Amen.