

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Second Sunday After Pentecost
3 June 2018

Scripture readings:

1 Samuel 3:1-20 Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17 2 Corinthians 4:5-12 Mark 2:23-3:6

"The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread." Anything different today? I think we could honestly say that at times we feel and experience the absence of the word of the Lord. That's why we practice our religion. We return to the word here to remind ourselves. We live in a world which, I think, lacks vision in many respects about a lot of things - about our future and the future of others. We often hear arguments being made about what we do now and how it will or will not affect our grandchildren - if you have them.

There is this strange story of Samuel - not only being called, but being called to tell Eli, who is sort of the vehicle for the call - to tell Eli some really bad news. *"For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them."*

But then in the gospel, this extraordinary gospel, we read about good church people - church people like you - who are called Pharisees. Where I grew up, a Pharisee was a naughty word, something I didn't want to be. The scribes and the Pharisees were usually hooked up with the Jews and other pejoratives in the early church. But we must remember that Pharisees were religious people, and they were really trying to make God happy with them. And to do that, they knew the rules. But it seems to me that in their attempt to establish a relationship with God, they probably had that wrong from the beginning - that that was **their** job rather than God establishing a relationship with **them**. But, nevertheless, they wanted to establish a relationship with God, that God was somehow related to the rules and knowing the rules and obeying the rules - even though they didn't like it. That led to what happened earlier this morning when Carol sat in the last pew and told everybody else to sit further up front in the church - a simple but extraordinary and exquisite example of hypocrisy! *[laughter]* I grew up hearing from my beloved father something you may have said to your own children: *"Don't do as I do; do as I tell you!"* Yes, exactly!

Here is this invitation from Jesus to consider what is going on in terms of the Pharisaic understanding of the law and the difference between what we quite normally refer to as the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. Well, there's the paradigm. It's at least two thousand years old for us, but it is extraordinarily current and important for us today as well. Sometimes, when in discussions about the idea that the church is dying, I often say, *"I don't think the church is as much dying as it is committing suicide."* This kind of hypocrisy and arrogance and legalism, expecting people to serve the law rather than the law being there to help and serve people, is a part - not the entire reason - but a part of the problem. Jesus raises the issue - Is the Sabbath there for us to support or is the Sabbath there to support us as God's people and God's creation?

And so the dialectic becomes pretty clear in the gospel that Jesus is talking about the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. Are there a couple other ways we could understand that question or that dialectic, that bifurcation of the truth of what's being said? Well, you could say, *"Is it right or is it wrong?"* Kids understand that pretty clearly. Is it fair or unfair? That's not fair! We get that stuff. There are huge philosophies and theologies developed around morality. That's not moral or it's moral or it's immoral. And today we face the discussions - Is it true or is it false?

Jesus knows that the Pharisees know. Jesus knows the difference and so do the Pharisees know the difference, but the Pharisees are going to apply the law to the last jot and tittle because they are uncomfortable with the message that Jesus brings which stands in complete opposition to the kind of religious structure they are used to, because the message that Jesus brings offers them no hope of being self-righteous, offers them no hope of being more religious than anybody else, offers them no hope of being superior, offers them no hope any more than anybody else receives hope from God. The message that Jesus brings is truly good news because it is the good news of God's love for all people everywhere, even those who didn't know the law, even those who didn't know which duck to kill for which sin - or chicken or cow, didn't know which incense to burn for which purpose, didn't know which prayer to say to get what they wanted. Jesus takes the entire structure of religion and society and culture and blows it to pieces with this idea which isn't new to anybody. It's in the first words of scripture - that God creates the world and everyone in it and loves what God creates.

Now they were happy with thinking that God liked them better. You know that I want to think that my mother

loved me better because I was so much better than the others - right? That's like sitting in the last pew and telling everybody else to sit further to the front of the church. *[laughter]* It just isn't true, and what Jesus said **is!** We know the difference between truth and lies. We know the difference between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law. We know what is moral and what is immoral. We know what is right and what is wrong.

And then when we say we believe that stuff and we look at our world and we attempt to apply what it is we believe to what it is we see in the world where the word of the Lord is rare and visions are not widespread, we are forced to say that it is immoral, it is wrong, it is not fair, it is unjust - and although it may look like the law, it is against the law spiritually and morally to take infants from their parents for any godforsaken reason in the world! Sorry. It's not arguable.

Jesus knew what it was to face the letter of the law and to live the spirit of the law. He knew what that meant, and he also knew what it would cost him - because the last phrase of the gospel today tells us. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians about how to destroy that gospel, that good news, that word from God. It's abhorrent to the law rulers, to the liar believers, to the unjust who would attempt to create all kinds of clever arguments to do that which is immoral, to do that which is wrong, to do that which is unfair, to do that which looks like obeying the law while being absolutely abhorrent to its intention.

The gospel we receive is - at least in this case - two thousand years old. Friends, this is not preaching politics. This is confessing our faith, and our faith interfaces with everything we have and do and how we live.

You got an e-mail from me this week about an encounter I had on my front porch - which was informative and did me more good than I ever imagined it would. I got criticism from my older brother for "playing" with her. I had shared with him that I had a visit from a Jehovah's Witness. The interesting response from her that was helpful to me was that "we only vote once, and it's for Jesus!" Well, I'm not sure we disagree much with that, but we vote all the time in terms of everything we do, every choice we make, every penny we spend, and every ballot we cast. We vote either for the letter or the spirit of the law, for truth or falsehood, for right or for wrong, for moral or for immoral. And I am not suggesting that we are always right, but we are always in the business of working toward that as a goal. We are never given the option of throwing up our hands and saying, "What can I do?" Well, you don't know what you can do, but God does. And what you **can** do is live like the Christian you confess yourself to be - which is a lover of truth, a lover of the spirit, a lover of honesty, moral integrity and justice for all people. This is why we call ourselves the Body of Christ, and even though the word of the Lord was rare in those days and visions were not widespread, we believe and teach and confess that as Christ's body we are incorporated into the visible, living presence of Christ in this world today, and that just might have some consequences - because as glibly as we say it, speaking the truth to power may not always be easy but it will surely have consequences, and they may be consequences that save the world. And if they don't save the world, they just might save our own integrity as Christian people and members of the Body of Christ!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.