

Knowing the Good

March 7, 2021

Earlier this week, one of my best clergy friends sent me this email reminder:

- Drink your water.
- Stay focused and positive.
- Don't freak out.
- Remember, stabbing people is wrong.
- Are you wearing pants?

The lack of having to wear pants has been a running joke amidst the pandemic, but what's funny about my friend's list is how quickly it devolves. We move from universal good to "Lord of the Flies" in five short steps. What's particularly telling is how many things in life can spiral out of control that quickly. Life's good, the sun is shining, we're leading an upright, moral, healthy life, and then, BLAM, someone does something or something happens, and we have to be reminded that stabbing people is wrong.

Most of us, most of the time, are pretty good. We don't stab anyone. We're faithful to our partners. We vote. We try to be kind to our families and friends.

AND, it's really easy to do things that aren't so good. Lots of people lie to get out of jury duty. Lots of people fudge on their taxes, telling themselves that it's not really cheating or lying or stealing. Lots of people dump toxic chemicals when they think no one is watching. It's easy to justify most of the things that have us looking out for number one, at the expense of those around us.

Did you notice that list – lying about jury duty, fudging on taxes, dumping toxic chemicals – is really about prioritizing "me" over "we"?

Our Gospel passage today continues to follow the passages highlighted in our "Reflections on the Heart" and "Where Your Heart Is" Lenten devotionals from Illustrated Ministry, and in that it's a different reading than we usually read during Lent. In fact, even though a similar story appears in all three synoptic Gospels, churches that follow the lectionary only hear it once every three years. I suspect that is, in part, because the lectionary was put together by people from capitalistically based cultures, and this idea of selling everything that we have and giving it to the poor in order to faithfully follow Jesus is a hard pill to swallow.

Nonetheless, if we explore the text, I think it has a lot of important takeaways. First, it's interesting that the inquirer asks Jesus what is required to achieve eternal life, but Jesus responds with what is required to achieve life. Jesus' message here is clear. The question shouldn't be about the next life. Do right in your relationships in this life, both personal and communal, and the next life will take care of itself. Jesus tells the inquirer not only to abide by the commandments, but also adds the concept of loving one's neighbor as oneself.

Friends, I'd like to suggest that the rest of the passage is Jesus playing love of neighbor out to its logical conclusion. If we truly love our neighbors, we take care of them. If we truly love our neighbors, we don't hoard our resources. Lots of us are willing to be decent – to buy a gift for the Christmas Giving Tree and put some food in the Blessing Box – but how many of us are

willing to allow our standard of living to be less, so that people who are struggling will struggle less? Put another way, how many of us are willing to make this world less hellish for others, if it means this world isn't quite as cushy for ourselves?

This question is really what's at the heart of Christian efforts at racial justice, Christian social justice, Christian economic justice. We are called to make the world more like the reign of God for others, and Jesus says eternal life will sort itself out. Or rather, God will sort it out. As someone in our Tuesday noon Bible Study said, "This passage tells us that we're not saved on our own."

It's interesting that Jesus tells his questioner to follow the commandments, love one's neighbor, and engage in radical economic redistribution. The Psalm that Eric read for us today is commonly paired with the commandments. It's joyful, hopeful. And, in contrast to the person who walks away from Jesus, grieving because their possessions are so dear to them, the Psalmist tells us that living by God's laws and statutes revives the soul, rejoices the heart, and gives wisdom to the innocent. In short, living a Godly life is its own reward.

Years ago, Rachel Macy Stafford, a special education teacher, was asked, "How do you do it all?" She realized that, in "doing it all," she was missing out on life. The societal pressure of perfection had her focusing on achievements and productivity, and she was missing out on being there with and for her family and her community.

In the years since, she's taken to storytelling as a means to encourage people to focus on what really matters. This week, she wrote a piece, "Thank you for eating the expired cheese." It seems her teenage daughter had made herself a snack of cheese and crackers, and only after she had taken a bite did the young woman check the expiration date, which, it turns out, was six months previous.

Now, ever since she was a very little girl, she's had what her mother calls an irrational fear of germs and getting sick, and so, she was beside herself. "The package wasn't even open. It looked brand new. Do you think I'll get sick? It was only a little, tiny bite. Can you smell it?" she said, firing questions as she held out the guilty cheese.

In a split-second decision, the mom took a bite.

"Tastes fine to me," Stafford said matter-of-factly. "I'd probably eat the whole thing if it weren't YOUR snack."

Her daughter's whole face suddenly brightened. She began laughing, and then she wrapped her arms around me and squeezed tight.

"Thank you for eating the expired cheese," she said, her voice full of relief. "I'm not worried anymore."

I'm not sure what it was – the validation ... the humor ... the ridiculousness ... or the taste of that cheese – but I felt more at peace than I had in a long while. Stafford reflects: parenting in a pandemic has had me constantly questioning. Am I doing the right thing? Should I be more or less involved? Was that the right response? Should I be helping my kids more? Less? Is this the right choice? WHAT is the right choice? And in the midst of all this uncertainty, I do this

completely bizarre gesture because I KNOW in my heart of hearts it's the ONLY THING that will ease my daughter's worry.

This is a tiny example, and it's an effort made for someone in her own household, whom she loves and has responsibility for, but it leads us in the direction of what Jesus tells the rich young man that he needs to do: risk your own comfort to ease others' suffering.

As we continue to journey through this nontraditional Lent, this invitation looms large. Lent is a season of transformation, a season that invites us to turn away from the things that have built up and bloated us, and toward a more Godly way of being. A way of being that acknowledges, respects, and even celebrates that we are all interconnected, and that caring for one another, treating friend and stranger alike as Jesus would treat them, is its own reward. In fact, it's the way to our eternal reward. Founder of the Center for Action and Contemplation, Richard Rohr, points out, "Transformation has little to do with intelligence, willpower, or perfection. It has EVERYTHING to do with honesty, humility, willingness, and surrender."

Friends, I'm going to hammer this point home, a point I've made before, because it's been so misunderstood within Christianity over the years: Self-mastery and willpower may have value, but they are not Christian virtues. Getting to Easter without having stumbled in your Lenten practice may only prove that you're stubborn, and may not speak at all to a changed heart.

And so, with four weeks to go until Easter, with what looks like a few months to go until a solid chunk of the population is vaccinated and it is, hopefully, healthy to gather together again, my prayer is that we can all embrace more fully the Truth (I rarely use that word, but this is a Truth with a capital T) that making this world a better place for those in need will not only move them closer to the Kingdom of God, it will move us closer to it as well.

May it be so. Amen.

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Psalm 19, Matthew 19:16-26
(Illustrated Ministry - Camel through the eye of a needle)
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