

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
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Proper 18 Year C
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The first verse of our psalm this morning instructs us on how to live a happy life. And who among us would not wish that to be true. Surely we would rather be happy than unhappy, to have our plans fulfilled than thwarted, to prosper, than to live without, to have people's affirmation than condemnation, or to rest at night knowing you came closer to living the dream, than not.

The first verse of our psalm this morning also fixes the lens through which we are to read the entire psalter, for it turns our attention on how we are to live out the covenant of God, passed onto us by Moses through the Torah. We are to meditate upon God's law day and night; in other words, it is to become a part of us, it is to be integrated into our very being. This is why we offer scripture study monthly, why we gather to discuss the psalms this summer, and why we offer Morning Prayer. We want there to be a seamlessness between God's Word and our very being, and to do that, we need to sit with, study, and know with our heart, God's Word.

In addition, the first verse of our psalm this morning also acts as the Levitical gatekeeper to the Word of God. There is a strong warning against evil and the message is clear: if you are evil, or indulge in wicked ways, you need not read further. This text is not for you; it is instruction for the righteous on how to remain righteous.

The instructive message in our psalm this morning is quite simple and clear. To be happy you must enter into and know God's Word and you must identify and stay away from those who are wicked and evil. We are instructed not to be tempted by what the sinners and scoffers think, say or do; we are not to allow their messages of what is not of God (hate, anger, fear, and distrust,) to seep into our consciousness and way of being. We are not to become accustomed to or settle into any habit which will take us away from that which God is: love, justice, mercy, compassion, and respect for all people. Our work as faithful people is to always be vigilant, to ensure that our ways are God's ways, not the ways of the unrighteous or evil, and if we are to find ourselves there, we are to unlearn these bad habits and clear the wickedness out of our lives.

Our psalm sharply delineates the good from the bad, the righteous from the evil ones. The context of the psalm could explain why such a sharp line was needed at the time. This psalm was written after the exile of the ancient Jews in Babylon, when the faithful remnants returned to Jerusalem, leaving behind those who had assimilated into the Babylonian culture, who had "walked in the counsel of their oppressors," who had lingered in the ways of the sinners, the unbelievers, the impure by Jewish standards, and who had sat with, developed the habits of, and adopted the lifestyle of the scornful, who mocked the faithful Jews.

In our psalm, we can hear the need of the faithful remnants to gather those of like minds and hearts, to regroup, to redefine boundaries of belief and culture, and to set themselves apart as

those who are faithfully living into the covenant with God. Separation from the temptation of the evil ways and disassociating themselves from those who had veered from strict adherence to the Word of God was a necessary part of defining and reclaiming their true essence as God's faithful people.

We hear the same image of faithfulness from the prophet Jeremiah this morning, for he images God as a potter continually reshaping the collective life of the faithful people, gathering, strengthening, creating anew the community, and sometimes smashing the mounds of clay which have turned toward evil ways, even God's beloved nation of Israel, as a way of separating out the righteous from the evil ones. God's desire is to build a kingdom of righteousness and God will not hesitate to judge the wicked, even if they are God's chosen people.

As Christians, we may wonder about this fierce delineation and categorization of people into righteous or evil. We may balk at the idea that in order to stay in right relationship with God we are to isolate ourselves from those less pure. We may bristle at the idea that we should turn inward in order to protect ourselves from contamination from the world within which the righteous and unrighteous co-habitate. Already stories might be running through our minds of Jesus eating with the tax collectors, sitting with the sinners, walking with the prostitutes, mingling with the untouchables. Arguments against an elite society of believers, based upon the beatitudes, may be spinning a tale in minds. Our hearts may be remembering a time when we were less than perfect and when the compassion and mercy a righteous person showered upon us became the turning point in our life and we may believe that it was Christ himself showing up through that benevolent action, and we may wonder how could that co-mingling of the righteous and evil not be the kingdom of God?

And if this is where you are going, I applaud you. For I believe you are exactly right. The exiled Jews may have redrawn the boundaries of their religion, entrenching them in their purity laws to get themselves back into the right place with God. They may have sung this psalm in temple each day to remind themselves that they were called by God to be faithful partners in the covenant and that their focus was to become grounded again in the certainty of belief and action which constituted their part of the promise. In this time of upheaval, they may have needed to return to what was at their core and exclude anything that was not, to know more clearly who they really were. This can be true for us as well. In times of crisis, upheaval, and transition we too can find it appropriate to "circle the wagons," to draw within, to separate ourselves from the influences of others, to discern what is basic and true about ourselves.

As we know from history, Jesus, and then the apostles, especially Peter, broke those ethical boundaries open for the Jews, as the sister religion to rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, was formed.

Jesus, with his extravagant love for those ostracized from society, pushed the boundaries of what it meant to be righteous, requiring care to be extended beyond any social, ethnic, or class designation or any particular set of beliefs, as we remember in the story of the Good Samaritan.

For at this point in history, the word righteous was synonymous with benevolent. Jesus made it clear that to be righteous meant caring about your neighbor, whomever that might be. Rather than commanding the faithful to not associate with the lesser among them to maintain their purity, he commanded the faithful to associate with, to serve, and to love those who were in need. Suddenly righteousness had to do only with purity of heart. Anyone, in any circumstance, could be righteous. Anyone could care for those in need, the poor, the hungry, the widowed, the orphaned. And salvation began to be viewed not as right belief but as right heart toward those who Jesus cared most for: the oppressed, the lonely, the sick, those in prison, those orphaned or widowed, those disregarded by mainstream of society.

Jesus also set wide the pegs of the tent of Abraham, as he traveled into gentile country and converted the people he found there. This was a stretch for Jesus at times, as we remember the Syrophoenician woman at the well challenging him, but ultimately Jesus comes around to see the “nones” or “unchurched” as we would designate them today as his mission field. Jesus, and later Peter opened the eyes of the first century Jews to see the invitation of Jesus to love all of God’s people.

As we have, we can identify pivotal points in the expansion of the recipients of God’s presence and grace. We can see the pilgrimage or movement of a particular people of faith, initially with closed boundaries, to an expansiveness of love shared with all, for both Judaism and Christianity.

John Phillip Newell, a contemporary theologian from the Anglican tradition, offers a helpful way to look at the shift from ancient Judaism and early Christianity, where there were clearly defined boundaries, to the religion centered upon the directive Jesus gave his followers, to move into the unclear parts of our society and beyond expected parameters, and which offers instruction on how we can take our religion to the next step.

In his book, *The Rebirthing of God*, Newell speaks about a microphase of religion, when the religion is very young. Just like anything that is young and vulnerable, its uniqueness needs protection, which often happens through well-defined boundaries. At this stage, religions are like newly planted saplings, which need supports to steady the new life through the windstorms and changes of life. The blessings of the tradition seem primarily for those who come within its self-defined boundaries.

It makes sense to me that the ancient Israelites, being the only monotheistic religion at the time, had to clearly define themselves against the pagan religions of the day. Part of how they did this was to clearly articulate a set of beliefs and practices that defined who they were and were not.

Likewise, with early Christianity, early followers of Jesus needed to sort through their particular revelation of God through Christ and be clear and strong about the value of being a Christian.

However, Newell proposes that, when a religion has grown, which is where we may be now, as others speak about a re-emerging Christianity, when a religion becomes more established, it can begin to offer its blessings freely to the world, not with the intent of conversion, but with a desire to be a part of a larger whole. Newell posits that Christianity can enter the macro-phase of a religion, when we can extend the pegs of Abraham's tent once more, when we can push out the boundaries of who is within God's embrace once again as Jesus once did with the marginalized, when we can grow into a spiritual maturity that Paul speaks of, and we can offer our particular revelation and truth of God through Christ to others, offering them the blessings we enjoy, whether or not they will ever be Christians, as we profess. This pilgrimage would call us to look outside our doors, into our communities, to notice what God is already doing, actually without us, but with the invitation to join in. This is what many people call the missional church, the movement toward building the kingdom by meeting the kingdom in the schools, workplaces, prisons, rehab centers, and summer lunch programs.

Newell identifies three things that we as Christians can uniquely offer the world, to join in what God is already doing:

- 1) We hold within our religion an awareness of earth's sacredness that could more deeply serve today's environmental movements.
- 2) We inherited from Jesus a vision of non-violence that could profoundly redirect our nations from conflict to peace, and
- 3) Jesus taught the practices of compassion for those who are poor, hungry, and sick. This focus could play a foundational role in the well-being of any society.

So here we have returned, to the ancient Hebrew understanding of righteousness at the time of the psalmist's writing: benevolence toward the poor, hungry, and sick. Our psalm tells us that the Lord knows the way of the righteous. May today we be righteous; may today we practice compassion for those who are in most need of God's grace; may today we take the best of who we are as Christians and meet God in the world and bring in God's kingdom of righteous people.
Amen.