

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Psalm 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

The last several Sundays we've heard about the ones that Jesus says are blessed. And we have heard Jesus say that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Jesus is instructing his disciples and also us in the ways of the kingdom of God. We are challenged then to figure out how we are to be the salt of the earth in the circumstances in which we now find ourselves and how are we to be the light of the world in the world we live in. Last Sunday, Bishop Ted told us about a little village of just 300 people in France that saved 5000 Jews during the years of the Holocaust in Germany. And he questioned us as well as himself about whether or not we would do the same under similar circumstances should we ever hear that knock on the door and that plea for asylum from a stranger. It's a challenging question even today. None of us know for sure what we would do, but it's always a good question to consider.

This morning in the Gospel, Jesus broadens his instruction to his disciples and he turns his attention not just to the individuals who are blessed or to the challenge to us to be salt and light, but he focuses on what it means to be a disciple in community. What does it mean when our hearts and our attitudes as well as our actions impact those with whom we are in community? But when he says, "You have heard it said" and he cites the law itself, and then says, "but I say to you"....he's asking us to dig a little deeper. He's challenging us to go beyond the letter of the law to seek the spirit of that law. To go beyond the letter to the spirit is to include all the emotions and attitudes that we bring to the community in which we live.

Jesus doesn't describe the community. It could be any group of people who are intertwined by choice or circumstance. The community could be our extended family. It could be the school that we attend. It could be the neighborhood where we live. It could be the place where we work. It could be the church where we worship together and care for one another. Jesus is speaking to each of us in our current circumstances. This gospel lesson this morning is all about

how our own choices and our own actions impact those to whom we are connected. We have a certain amount of accountability to those in our community in what we say and what we do and even in how we feel. Being a disciple is not just about us as individuals. It's about us in relationship to others.

Disciples then don't act in a vacuum. As much as our society applauds individualism, Jesus does not. We are accountable individually, but we act and react in concert with others. In that respect, we as Christians are counter-cultural. Americans hold dear the concept of rugged individualism. But there are no Lone Ranger Christians. At the very least, Jesus sends his followers out in pairs. And it is the gospel of Matthew that reminds us that 'whenever two or three are gathered together in his name, Jesus will be among them.' The message in our gospel lesson this morning challenges those who identify themselves as Christian, but shy away from being part of a group of Christians known as the church. It is within this particular community that we have access to Jesus in community. And it is within that particular community that we have the opportunity to experiment with digging a little deeper into the law. It is within the community of the Church, the body of Christ, that we have a chance to hone our skills as Christians so that we can take these skills out into the other communities to which we belong and shine the light of Christ. In our church communities, we can test out how Jesus has instructed us to live with one another and we can deepen our own spiritual life within the law by changing our own hearts and our own attitudes with a group of other Christians who are trying out the same strategies. Within the community of the church, we can dig a little deeper with some good effect because all those around us are doing their own bit of digging as well. How we work out being disciples of Christ is not something that we do alone. It can and should happen in a community of the faithful. What we do and say and think and feel matters.....not just to us and not just to Jesus, but to all those around us. We need the help of others and we need to help others.

This is the season.....the season of Epiphany.....in which we are reminded of Emmanuel.....God is with *us*. It isn't just that God is with *me*. God is with *us*. As God moves among us and between us in community, we are shaped by the community and we help shape the community. Our God

is not the God of isolationism. Our God is the God of community. Our God is the God of connections between and among human beings.

We heard a very bold statement this morning in the Gospel. Jesus says to his disciples: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Now that's a pretty tall order. The scribes and the Pharisees are the keepers of the Law of God. They are the ones who are highly educated and trained to not only understand the law and interpret the law, but to teach the law and to model the law." But Jesus is telling us that understanding the law and not breaking any of the rules is not all there is. Jesus is calling us, his disciples, to dig a little deeper. Jesus refers to 'righteousness'. So what does he mean by 'righteousness'? Is he talking about purity? Is he talking about perfection? Is he talking about piety? Is he talking about never making a misstep in the eyes of God?

We've been studying St. Paul's letter to the Romans in our Adult Formation class and one of the things we have been coming to understand is the meaning of the word 'righteousness.' It doesn't mean what many of us have always thought it means. It isn't about perfection. It isn't about piety. It isn't about purity. It's about being in right relationship with God. What Jesus is telling us this morning is that being in right relationship with God is so much more than just not breaking any of the rules. We can avoid breaking any of the rules, but have hearts of stone. That's not being righteous. We can know all the law and the prophets, but have no use for others. That's not being righteous. And Jesus is calling us to be righteous....more righteous than the scribes and the Pharisees who know the law and never break it.

God has impressed upon us that we are to love God and we are to love our neighbors.....that would be all of God's children. We are to love the ones who are unlovable. And if the truth be known, the ones who need our love the most are very often the ones who are the hardest to love. Stop and think about your own life. Stop and think about what Bishop Ted told us when he went through our baptismal covenant with us. We are to love ALL people.....not just the ones we like or get along with, but the ones we find troublesome.....the ones who get under our skin.....the ones who rub us the wrong way.....the ones who are frustrating or even hurtful.....the ones we would just as soon walk away from. We are called to love ALL of them!

We are called to dig a little deeper. We are called to change our own hearts. We are called to change our own attitudes. We are called to be open-minded. We are called to forgive and let it go and go on. We are called to be aware of our own impact on others. We are called to be in community for that is where we will find Emmanuel.....God with us. All of this may seem like an impossible task, but that's why Jesus has come. That's why God is with us. Because no matter how difficult the task may be, we know that through Him, all things are possible.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.