

Pentecost 9, August 7, 2022

(Lk 12:32-34; Ps 50:1-8, 12-19, 22-23; Heb 11:1; Is 1:10-20)

How can you worship a homeless man on Sunday, and ignore one on Monday?
These words are on a poster on the door of a homeless shelter.

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Only three chapters ago Jesus was discouraging men from following him: **Every fox has its lair, he said, and every bird its nest, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.** Jesus proclaims himself a “homeless man.”

Today’s readings from the Hebrew scriptures make very plain God’s problem with worship: the *disconnect* between what happens inside the sanctuary and what happens outside of it. Both Isaiah and the Psalm speak God’s displeasure in words of a courtroom drama, a much-used format for biblical pronouncements.

The psalmist invites the sinful leaders to a trial: **The Mighty One, God, the Lord, summons the heavens above, and the earth, that he may judge his people, who made a covenant with him by sacrifice. And the heavens proclaim his righteousness, for God himself is judge. . . . Hear, O my people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you.**

The next verses tell the “faithful” people what God thinks of their sacrifices and burnt offerings: not much. **If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats? But sacrifice thank offerings to God, and fulfill your vows to the Most High.**

So much for those who are mostly faithful. But listen to God’s scathing words to the wicked: **What right have you to recite my laws or take my covenant on your lips? You hate my instruction and cast my words behind you. . . . You use your mouth for evil and harness your tongue to deceit. . . . Consider this, you who forget God. . . He who sacrifices thank offerings honors me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.**

Do you hear God's charge against Israel? (And in the present day, that would be *us*.) Your worship is empty, he says. You've forgotten your Creator and your covenant, your contract with God. You've gotten caught up in the trappings of your worship, the bells and whistles, the robes and vessels. You've forgotten that all true worship begins and ends with *thanksgiving*. And *thanksgiving* is the opposite of *idolatry*—which we learned last week is a form of *greed*. You've forgotten that all God really asks for is worship with a thankful heart (*Daily Feast*, C, Quinn G. Caldwell, p.408).

Listen again to the prophet Isaiah, who sets up a courtroom scene: **Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord. Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.**

Over and over the Hebrew scriptures command God's faithful to care for *the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in their midst*. And Jesus both commanded and modeled reaching out to *the last, the least, the little, the lonely, and the lost*. God is deeply offended by the so-called "worship" of those who bring **meaningless offerings, detestable incense, special assemblies, appointed feasts**—these would be the equivalent of our scheduled worship services. **"My soul hates them, they have become a burden to me, God says. Your hands are full of blood!**

"Proper offerings and rituals in the Temple meant nothing if not accompanied by proper treatment of people outside the Temple," (*Disciplines*, 2019, Larry Peacock, p. 261). How often have our congregations battled over worship: what kind of music to play, how (and how often) should communion be celebrated, should there be flags in the sanctuary, and other issues that we see as significant.

We spend enormous amounts of time and energy discussing, even arguing, about what "should" be done in church and how it should be done.

But what our Lord, and our *faith*, call us to do is to look outside the place of worship. We're called to change systems that pay less than a living wage to working widows and parents of young children, systems that encourage the building of luxury condos instead of affordable housing, systems where money and power set priorities, systems that legitimize hostility and violence towards those who are different from "us."

Isaiah spoke God's word to his constituents: **When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you. . . your hands are full of blood! . . . Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.**

How can you worship a homeless man on Sunday, and ignore one on Monday? Does our worship lead us to acts of mercy and justice? If we, the people of God, want to lift our hands to God in prayer, we must hold also out our hands to the most vulnerable (*Daily Feast, C*, p. 407).

Why do we come together to worship God? Why did Jesus allow himself to be nailed to the cross by our sins? *How can you worship a homeless man on Sunday, and ignore one on Monday?*

Let's pray: God of justice and compassion, open our ears to hear the cries of the poor. Soften our hearts so we can feel the pain of the wounded and hungry. Break our stony hearts with the things that break *your* heart. Amen.