

Pentecost 9, August 11, 2019

(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.

How can you worship a homeless man on Sunday, and ignore one on Monday? 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.**

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 at the vast contrast between "worship" and daily life.

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 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*.) God's verdict: guilty as charged! 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 praise*. You've forgotten that all God really asks for is worship with a thankful heart (*Daily Feast, C*, Quinn G. Caldwell, p.408).

Last Tuesday we had a Parish Education meeting at St. John. One item of discussion was *acolytes*. What do we do with the kids in Confirmation classes who in the past served as acolytes: lighting and extinguishing candles, receiving the offering plates from the ushers, and helping with communion.

The reality of the rural or small congregation today is very different from what it was three generations ago when our beautiful sanctuary was built. Back then, kids preparing to be confirmed came to Catechism classes every Wednesday *and* every Saturday morning, if I'm not mistaken. Schools kept Wednesday evenings free for church activities, and there were no sports activities Sunday mornings. Sunday School met either before or after worship, so the acolytes were actually able to be present for the entire service.

Now look back to the beginning of our faith. There are no *acolytes* mentioned in the Bible. Jesus never "went to church"; he went to synagogue. As a boy in Hebrew school, all he did on the Sabbath was read from the sacred scrolls.

We sometimes ask, “what would Jesus do?” So what shall we expect, or demand, of our acolytes? I invite you to ponder that, and other significant issues.

Listen again to the prophet Isaiah, who sets up another 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.**

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!**

In Bible times, “proper offerings and rituals in the Temple meant nothing if they weren’t accompanied by proper treatment of people outside the Temple,” (*Disciplines*, 2019, Larry Peacock, p. 261).

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

Most congregations have battled over worship issues, like what kind of music to play; how (and how often) should communion be celebrated; should there be flags in the sanctuary; at what age should young people be confirmed, and how strict should their requirements be; and other issues that we see as significant.

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 sports arenas instead of affordable housing; systems where priorities are set by money and power; systems that legitimize hostility and violence towards those who are different from "us."

In addition to the always-present suffering and sorrow of poverty and powerlessness, our country today is in the grip of a rampage of violence. Last Monday Roman Catholic Archbishop Chaput (*SHAP-you*) in Philadelphia posted these words which he'd written 20 years ago after the Columbine shooting:

In the last four decades we've created a culture that markets violence in dozens of different ways, seven days a week. It's part of our social fabric. When we build our advertising campaigns on consumer selfishness and greed, and when money becomes the universal measure of value, how can we be surprised when our sense of community erodes? When we glorify and multiply guns, why are we shocked when kids use them? . . . Certain kinds of killing we enshrine as rights and protect by law. When we live this kind of contradiction, why are we surprised at the results?

Now hear his reflections after the shootings in Gilroy, California; El Paso, Texas; and Dayton, Ohio, which he calls *just the latest in a long pattern of mass shootings; shootings that have blood-stained the past two decades with no end in sight. I buried some of the Columbine victims 20 years ago, he writes. I sat with their families, watched them weep, listened to their anger, and saw the human wreckage that gun violence leaves behind. The experience taught me that assault rifles are not a birthright, and the Second Amendment is not a Golden Calf. . . .*

But it also taught me that only a fool can believe “gun control” will solve the problem of mass violence. The people using the guns in these loathsome incidents are moral agents with twisted hearts. And the twisting is done by the culture of sexual anarchy, personal excess, political hatreds, intellectual dishonesty, and perverted freedoms that we’ve systematically created over the past half-century. . . . Treating the symptoms in a culture of violence doesn’t work. We need to look deeper. Until we’re willing to do that, nothing fundamental will change.

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 those who are 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. Make us worthy, Lord, to serve our fellow human beings throughout the world who live and die in poverty and hunger. Give them, through our hands, this day their daily bread, and by our compassion for your name’s sake, give peace and justice. Amen (*Disciplines*, 2019, p. 261; Job/Shawchuck, p. 257).