

The Federated Church of Hyannis

Sunday, February 28, 2021

Reverend Derek White, Pastor

Sermon: Letting Go, Part 2

Scripture: Matthew 12:1-8

At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, “Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath.” He answered, “Haven’t you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven’t you read in the Law that the priests on Sabbath duty in the temple desecrate the Sabbath and yet are innocent? I tell you that something greater than the temple is here. If you had known what these words mean, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

Introduction

Welcome to our Part 2 of our series called “Letting Go” during the season of Lent.

Last week we focused on the importance of letting go in order to take up something new. The idea that God cares about what we do more than what we don’t do. It is the freeing up of self in order to be able to follow Jesus. We should let go of the things that hold us back from doing good.

This week is learning to let go of misunderstandings. Everyone has misunderstandings. The challenge comes when those misunderstandings become rooted in tradition. Like the musical “Fiddler on the Roof”, no one knows why we do it but it is tradition.

PART 1: Tradition

I’ll never forget years ago, while working for a church as a youth minister, being given an instruction manual for how to open the church sanctuary. That may seem a bit strange to some but there are lots of switches and controls to turn on - lights, sound systems, and even the blower for the organ. There was one switch in the manual to turn on labeled “unknown” that I never saw what it did. When I asked the chairman of the building committee what it did, he didn’t know. Then one Sunday I turned it on and I heard a buzzing noise. It was a sound I had never heard before. The church had an electrician come in to look at it. It turned out the switch went to a circuit breaker that had been turned off for years. Someone had switched the circuit breaker on and the switch went to the heater of the baptismal tank at the back of the

sanctuary. The church hadn't used the tank in over 20 years. But we turned on the switch every time the Sanctuary was opened.

Tradition.

The purpose of tradition is not to be legalistic. Traditions give meaning and purpose, not hard rules.

PART 2: Jesus Explains the Purpose of the Law

Here in today's passage, we see the Pharisees, the rule enforcers in Judaism questioning Jesus' authority as a Rabbi because his disciples are picking grains on the Sabbath. They were the priests in charge of the rituals and customs much like judges. And they wrote books on how to apply the Levitical law so that it would be fairly observed by all. In the Talmud, which is a concordance of Rabbinic teaching and interpretations of the holy scripture, it says picking grain and rolling them together in a person's hand is considered harvesting. So when Jesus' disciples pick the grain and roll them in their hands to remove the hard sheath on them to eat the kernel inside on the Sabbath, technically they are harvesting grain on the Sabbath. This is a violation of the commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy. What the disciples were doing would have been seen as work, when in reality what they were doing was eating because they were hungry.

Jesus explains to the Pharisees the spirit of the law over the letter of the law. In essence, Jesus calls out the Pharisees as misinterpreting the law. God did not give the law to burden people, God gave the law to bless people. More importantly Jesus explains the need to be compassionate when applying the law. He uses the story of David taking the sacrificial bread. Under the law only the priests who were the descendants of Aaron could eat the sacrificial bread. The Pharisees would have been the priests who descended from the line of Aaron. It was their ancestors who allowed King David to break the law by eating the consecrated bread. Because David was running from Saul who was trying to murder him, the priest took David and his men in hide from King Saul. And David was so hungry, he pleaded with the priests to show compassion and give him the consecrated bread. David ate the bread. Jesus shows the Pharisee how their ancestors in the past demonstrated compassion when it came to the requirements of the law. There is a tradition of compassion built into the law. Jesus' explanation wins the case, but it also makes contention with the Pharisees.

Unfortunately, for thousands of years there have been back and forth similar battles of religious leaders trying to point out hypocrisies in each other's teachings. The Pharisees challenge Jesus' authority and Jesus challenges their authority right back. At the end of the day it is the tradition of compassion that wins the case in the picking of the grain on the Sabbath day. When a Rabbi won an argument, it would usually be recorded in the Talmud as a precedent

to settle future cases and teachings on the subject. A Rabbi from Nazareth winning a case against Pharisees from Jerusalem would have been a David vs. Goliath type of case. Yet Jesus continues to win such challenges over and over again because Jesus is the Son of God, the author of the law.

Part 3: Compassion

The tradition of compassion is the tradition God asks all of us to follow. I shared a couple weeks ago in church the story of wearing my hat in the sanctuary as a young man. I was reminded with the tap on the head to take that hat off. I didn't know the tradition of not wearing hats in the sanctuary. And while I learned the lesson, there could have been a more compassionate way of teaching me it than a tap on the head.

Had I not grown up in the church I might never have returned after an experience like that. It is important to not allow traditions to become hard rules that turn people away. We should always be welcoming and inviting in the way we share compassion with one another. Jesus shared that the law was to show the compassion of God, not to put us down for breaking it.

Conclusion

Years ago, I learned this important lesson of theology. Always ask the question, how does this glorify God? Whatever the decision, the tradition, or the actions always make it God honoring. This is the heart and purpose of the lessons of the Bible. In everything we do, we should honor God. And the best way to do that is by applying rules, laws, decisions, and actions grounded in compassionate understanding.

I will leave with this. Not too long ago a friend of mine had to counsel an individual in trouble. Never an easy task to do. But she did it with compassion. It gave the person hope to be able to recover from the mistake and go on to a bright future. Jesus came to offer all of us hope so that we too could overcome mistakes and sinful pasts in order to have a better future.

Let us let go of the things that would rob us of the identity that God seeks for us to have in Christ. Let us be gracious and compassionate in the way we care for one another. May our traditions be one of compassion. Amen.