

Sermon Epiphany VI Year A 2011
February 13, 2011
Ecclesiasticus 15:15-20
1 Corinthians 3:1-9
Matthew 5:21-37
Psalm 119:1-8
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The scriptures this morning all seem to be speaking to us about choices. The lessons point us to the choices we make in living a faithful life.

Our lesson from Ecclesiasticus begins by calling us to choose faithfully following the commandments. “If you choose, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice.” “He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you choose.” The choices would seem to be clearly delineated, fire and water. Sounds easy but that has not been my experience. Perhaps your experience of trying to live faithfully has not been so straightforward either.

Our reading from Psalm 119 also calls us to “walk in the way of the law” keeping the commandments of God. Our portion of Psalm 119 included only the first eight verses, yet it continues for 176 verses, a full 14 pages in our BCP, each of the verses is focused on keeping the commandments of God. Clearly keeping the commandments is central to the life of faith.

You get the idea, scripture is calling us to choose, to choose to keep the commandments of God.

The apostle Paul is also speaking of choices in his address to the Christian community in Corinth. Paul is encouraging the fledging disciples in that community to not be distracted in their allegiance. From our lesson this morning it is clear that the tendency of Christian groups to splinter and break into factions began very early in the church’s life. It seems that the missionary, Apollos, had attracted quite a few followers. Paul seemed to be facing a situation in Corinth where the community was splitting into groups. Some claimed to be followers of Apollos while others described themselves as followers of Paul. Paul is disturbed by this early tendency toward divided loyalties. Using an agricultural metaphor, Paul encourages us to keep our attention focused on God, the source of our growth in faith. Living in a culture with so many Christian denominations and divisions can make Paul’s appeal sound quaint. But divisions which distract us from the mission of God are dangerous. Paul wants the Christians at Corinth to be united. They are not disciples of Apollos or of Paul, but of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Paul gives us clear directions, “We are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.” What a holy calling.

Our gospel lesson also seems to be about our choice to follow the commandments. Our lesson continues Jesus’ teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins by focusing on the commandment, “You shall not murder.” Now there is a commandment that most of us can say we have observed faithfully. But immediately, we sense trouble in the opening line. Jesus is not just calling us to keep the commandment; no he has a higher

calling in mind. “You have heard that it was said in ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.” Uh oh. Judgment just for being angry. We’re in trouble now. Jesus begins with the commandments and then takes us deeper, to the feelings and emotions that are the basis of the commandments. Jesus seems to be making the requirements of a faithful life even more demanding.

For the past two weeks we have watched as anger has brought about great change in the Middle East. Yet, Jesus would have us forsake anger. He has an entirely different perspective on anger. Anger is the root of murder and Jesus is calling us away not just from murder, but its root as well, anger.

Now this isn’t an entirely new concept; the psalms encourage us to be careful of anger as well. (Quote, “leave rage alone, it leads only to evil.”) Jesus takes us beyond the familiar commandments encouraging us to address the emotions that lie at the root of the commandments as well. Living faithfully isn’t as simple as not committing murder, it is controlling our temper and anger as well.

Suddenly the choices before us do not seem so straightforward. It isn’t just murder that we are to avoid, but anger as well. It seems that Jesus knows something that neuroscientists are just discovering. Anger is a complex emotion. There is a part that we cannot control, that is the automatic (autonomic) response that occurs when something happens. (for example: cut off in traffic). But that automatic response only lasts for 90 seconds. 90 seconds and the neuromediators have dispersed. Anger that lasts longer is anger that we are actively maintaining, nourishing, cultivating. Jesus is encouraging us to let that anger go.

The life of faith it seems is never as simple or straightforward as some might suggest. Living faithfully requires constant reflection on the underlying motives of our actions. I have always found the bracelets that had the initials WWJD on them to be problematic. Do you remember those bracelets that were popular a while back? WWJD stands for “what would Jesus do?” The question that I struggle with is not WWJD, but rather, “What would Jesus have me do?” That is the question I face each morning as I begin my day. WWJHMD. What are the choices that God is calling me to make today?

This congregation has a lot of experience with making faithful choices. A century’s worth in fact.

Today we gather to mark a key point in our Centennial Year journey together. A point that has been our goal since my first day in my study on October 1 of last year. Since that time we have been as Paul said, “servants of God, working together.” We are the inheritors of a century of worship and mission in this beautiful sacred space. To continue the ministry of St. John’s, of sharing Christ’s love, is a high calling indeed. You have for some time been looking forward to this centennial year of celebration of gathering to give thanks for the people who have brought us to this point and to look forward as we live into a new century of mission and ministry.

Your dream goes back many years. Three years ago you retained the services of highly respected structural engineers from Charleston, SC with extensive experience in church restoration. That firm has done a careful analysis of our moisture problems and presented their findings to the parish in the Fall of 2009. That presentation was then placed on the web site so that everyone could see firsthand the problems that we face. The problems are longstanding, they have resisted earlier attempts at correction, and they will be expensive to address. But they cannot be ignored, they must be addressed.

After careful consideration of the options, your vestry decided to conduct a capital campaign corresponding with this our Centennial Year. That campaign has several areas of focus. The first and foremost is to restore St. John's Church so that it will continue to be a beacon of hope in our community. St. John's is so much more than a beautiful place of worship. St. John's is where disciples of Jesus Christ are formed and where the mission of Jesus spreads into our community and the world beyond.

As you designed the scope of this campaign you included two other focuses as well. One was to give a gift to the community in thanksgiving for all their support over this last century. The third area of focus is to make a contribution to the endowment fund designed to support the ministry and mission of St. John's for generations to come. Those are the hopes that have guided this faith community for some time.

As you embarked on the Centennial Campaign, you retained a professional fundraiser to assist with this work. Alas, on my first day here, that relationship was coming apart. (What a greeting.) The terms of the contract were not being fulfilled and within two weeks the relationship had been terminated.

Yet, your faith carried you forward. Caring and committed leaders were selected and came forward to foster and direct the campaign. Since I arrived your Centennial Campaign has been carefully overseen by the work of the Steering Committee. The members have worked faithfully and enthusiastically and I think they are a great example of "servants of God, working together."

The Apostle Paul reminds us that we are God's field, God's building in this place. Now capital campaigns are wonderful times in the life of any parish. They bring people together in a common purpose and can really energize and inspire a congregation. Together we can achieve our goals and the long term benefit that this campaign will make possible. Capital campaigns are opportunities for everyone at St. John's to be involved. If we are successful everyone at St. John's will have an opportunity to participate as we bring to fruition God's dream of restoring St. John's Church.

But there can be a down side to capital campaigns as well. Capital campaigns can inadvertently cause hurt feelings and sometimes even anger. Asking for money has a way of doing that. At no time has anyone on the Campaign Steering Committee intended to hurt or anger anyone. But sometimes these things happen. If you have felt hurt by some aspect of the campaign, I extend my sincere apology. If I can speak with you privately, I would be happy to.

Now, just over four months since I arrived, we have reached a critical point as we gather on this our Celebration Sunday. We gather to celebrate accomplishments, and to give thanks for the faithful commitment of this parish. I am so thankful to have been called to be your rector and to be with you on this sacred journey. These are indeed exciting times and we have challenging work ahead. But then we are armed with the gospel of Jesus Christ. We have the good news to share with the community outside our doors and the world beyond. This is our place of ministry; this is where we have been called by God as disciples of Jesus Christ. As St. Paul described us this morning, we are “servants of God, working together.” We are God’s field, God’s building. Friends, there is no higher calling than this.