

## **Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost September 1 2024**

**Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; James 1:17-27; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23**

I wonder if the life fuller and more abundant that God in Jesus calls us to. This life in the reign of God, that we have been talking about this whole season after Pentecost. I wonder if that life is one built more on our asking questions than it is on our unchanging certainty.

This is, perhaps, a strange thing for a Lutheran to say as Martin Luther is best known for, "Here I stand, I can do no other!" But, hear me out. Deuteronomy 4 says, "You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you." One commentator says this is not so much about literalism, keeping every jot and tittle, but the fact that God is saying, I have given you all you need to live. Don't add any other requirements on top of that.

If that's the case, then this must mean that there are fundamental questions we regularly ask ourselves. How do the commands of God apply to this particular situation? Especially millennia after they have been given? And, did I just add something/take away something to God's commands? Did I just make something God's Law that really is my law?

It is the questions that drive faithfulness to God's commands. Not an unwavering and never changing adherence to a way of following those commands.

The other thing we need besides asking questions, is listening. Especially, listening for answers to the questions we ask. The writer of James reminds his readers that they should be swift to listen and slow to speak. Because it is only when we ask questions and then close our mouths and listen that we will find answers to those questions. Listening, both to God and our neighbor, leads to wisdom and faith.

Funnily enough- asking questions and listening to answers are two primary ways we build relationships with others. A skill we seem to have let lapse here in the US. In the Peer Ministry curriculum I'm using for Confirmation, the two primary lessons related to getting to know people is learning to ask the right kinds of questions, and then how to actively listen so that we can understand their responses.

This is how we get to know people. How our hearts are changed by their life experience, by their character, by their faithfulness. This is how we learn to live together. It's how God has made us, and what God calls us to.

If these assertions are true, that faithfulness lies in frequently asking basic questions and listening for answers. Then I wonder, also, if part of the problem we struggle with is that we in the US place too much importance on something feeling right or good to me. On an internal and individual understanding, rather than on an external and communal understanding. Which requires asking good questions and listening for answers. Because we need that outside input for wisdom and to be faithful.

This is not to say that the group is always right. Jesus' encounter with the Pharisees and scribes shows that even communally we can deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. Note that Jesus does not knock them for what they are doing. The washing of hands and foods was a way to be distinctively Jewish in the midst of Roman hegemony. Rather, Jesus knocks them for placing their lived traditions above God's commandments. When the two contradict, you always defer to God.

Friends, what saves is not our understanding of what God commands. Our vision of God's reign. What saves is God. Come to us in Jesus to love us from death into life. If we but....listen. We hear this refrain several times in Mark. Let everyone who has ears to hear, listen! Ecoute class!

Don't talk. Don't assume. Don't lay your own stuff on top of God's Word. Listen. Not just once, but all your life. Listen as if you had never heard it before. Listen to God not to respond, but to understand. Listen. And ask questions. Together.

The Hebrew Bible does a much better job of showing this, but the God we follow is one who is always up for a conversation. Will respond when we ask questions. From Job to Abraham. From David to Moses. Each asks questions. Often good ones. Ones that lead to greater understanding of what God is calling them to. Or, at least, greater acceptance. Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We may not understand, but we sure like listening to God talk. Because here are the words of life age long. The words that lead to life fuller and more abundant.

You want to be my followers; God says through James. Then listen way more than you talk. Then tame your anger- for your anger does not produce right relationship with God. Not in yourself not in others. So, take a chill pill.

We already know from Jesus what produces right relationship. Look back at Jesus' answer to the scribe in the Temple when asked about the greatest commandment. Love. Love God with

all that you are. Love your neighbor. Love, not anger, brings righteousness.

You want to be followers of God, then understand that what you most have to worry about is not external things, but internal things. Jesus reminds us it is from within that rotten, self-based reasoning comes. In the religious language of the day, these are the things that defile us. These are the things that make it impossible for us to approach God and be in right relationship with God. Not because God blocks us but because our own stuff gets in the way. Kind of like the unforgivable sin.

But James, that letter Luther could find no good news in, does have good news. That this life fuller and more abundant is not something we do. But that is given to us. James writes, readily receive, welcome, with meekness, the word that has been implanted, grafted, into you. For that implanted Word that is Jesus. That comes to us through scripture. That has the power to save us. And it comes to us. Is implanted in us. Not vice versa.

Our salvation lies not within us, but in what is given to us by God. Through Jesus. Through the Word of God. Through the church, when we're at our best. A Word that comes to us in the washing

of baptism and the Meal that is communion. A Word that transforms us from the inside out.

That Word, funnily enough, can also come in what Luther called the mutual conversation and consolation of the saints. The assembly of believers. That Word comes when we ask questions of faith of each other and listen carefully to the answers. That Word comes and transforms not just me but us as we listen to one another not just to respond, but to understand. As the Word seeps into us. Is the Bread of Life for us and transforms us one cell at a time.

And in the energy of that Word, then we can go forth and be doers of the Word. Using Mark's language, we can be followers of Jesus. Co-proclaimers of the Good News. Asking questions, listening for answers. Loving God and loving one another. Sounds like a pretty good life, doesn't it?

Friends, as we are on the cusp of a busy season in the church and our nation. Let us ask good questions of ourselves and our God. Let us listen together for the answers to those questions. For that is the way to life that truly is life.