

The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
July 5, 2020
Church of the Holy Cross
The Rev. Jamie Samilio

To Tell the Truth

As any good student knows, there is a difference between learning something and applying what you learn in real life. In our Collect today, the writer speaks of God teaching us to keep the commandments, loving God and each other. There is a big difference between learning what we should do, and actually doing it. I think there is a lot of truth in that.

For the past several months, we have experienced our world turned sideways. I have felt like I have been in a state of “hurry up and wait” for several months—promises of vaccines, and opening up the country, and COVID rates climbing, some false starts, and uncomfortable re-gathering plans, all pinned against a backdrop of “this is a hoax,” “we will need to live with it,” and “I am tired of being restricted,” banter on social media.

It is Independence Day weekend and we celebrate our freedom. The problem with living in a society where we can choose what we want to do, for the most part, is that we can become selfish and uncooperative when we are asked to put others first, to work as a team. Ah, the joys of being human.

We come by this honestly, this fickle, bratty nature we sometimes let slip past our social filters and the outward respect and restraint we exercise toward each other. For the most part, we know what we should say and do—we have been taught. But it is difficult to overcome the influence of our culture and our human nature.

Take the Gospel, for example. Jesus describes a generation that cannot recognize the truth that is right in front of them—sounds a lot like us today. Jesus said to the crowd, “To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another...” Jesus goes on to give examples of when John the Baptist came to them, neither eating or drinking—in other words, not acting outside of polite social norms—they said he was possessed by a demon. And now that Jesus is here and eating and drinking with sinners and tax collectors, they judge Him as a glutton and drunkard. No one likes to be stereotyped—do you?—and Jesus and John were no exceptions. Jesus seems anguished, He performed miracles, taught the people, and they heard Him, saw Him, and yet still rejected him. This Gospel is a warning that God makes what we are to do clear, but we still cannot understand or heed God’s word. One commentary said of Jesus’ reference to wisdom, *“Wisdom grants us the ability to understand beyond our sensory perception. If wisdom is vindicated by her deeds, what are her deeds? Wisdom provides order to chaos. She grants us humility and protects and guards us. Wisdom is a life-giving gift that comes with the Lord’s favor....The results of wisdom are evident.”*

Within the Jewish community where Jesus was born and raised, rabbis had different ways of interpreting the sacred scriptures. Each rabbi was a keeper of a particular tradition, also known as a “yoke.” To follow that rabbi meant that you were taking on his particular “yoke” or tradition. It included everything—understandings about God, customs of daily life, and how to treat each other. Those who followed a rabbi, became yoked to that rabbi, to learn how to be like him. The rabbi wanted disciples to follow him so that his views, his beliefs, his practices, would be carried into the future. To take the yoke of Jesus is not just for the best of the best, but for everyone. It is an invitation to take on the views, beliefs and practices of Jesus, practices that above all include loving each other. To take up that yoke however, we need to let go of what is weighing us down. What do we need to do to transfigure ourselves? To change into the kind of people who desire to do in the world what Jesus is calling us to do—to become yoked to Him.

People cannot seem to simply look for the good in others and love them for who they are. Our human nature tends toward the judgmental when it comes to other people. We want to know how we measure up to other people. In many ways, it is natural to prop ourselves up by tearing other people down. This is exactly the opposite of following the commandments—loving God and each other. We know what we are supposed to do in our heads, but until we commit to embodying that intention, our hearts will not be in it. As Aristotle said, *“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.”* We need to lay those burdens down, and take up the yoke of Jesus. This is where Paul’s words ring true for me, *“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”* Lucky for us, *“The LORD is gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger and of great kindness.”* And, *“The LORD is loving to everyone...”*

I am not sure how you feel, but I can tell you I need God to be loving, patient and forgiving. I have been overwhelmed at times these last few months. I can even understand people who are having trouble sorting out the truth—there is so much that distracts us, like children playing with toys, instead of paying attention to what is happening around them. When I am not sure how to even start to do something positive and productive, I am immediately distracted by what I see other people doing. One day, I had an idea. I thought Sylvia would like to spend some time with her sewing machine, so I set it up for her as a surprise. Well, that sewing machine did get some use! I fixed two pants pockets and a hem before I put it all away. She never touched it.

My judgment of what would be good for Sylvia was not in her plan. What I saw as a good idea for someone else, was not. I think this is where the phrase, “someone should do something” must have been born. We see something that needs to be done, and we assign it to someone else—even if we could do it ourselves. It is so much easier to decide what other people should be doing. In times like these, I need to exercise the most respect and restraint possible. I need to stay in my own lane; focus on the work I have been given; calm down; take small, deliberate steps in the right direction; and be grateful that I am safe and cared for. I should not judge others—I need to remember this and not get pulled in by the temptation to look for things for other people to do. It is always easier to be the boss of someone else than of yourself. Easier to try to control someone else, and get them to do what you’d rather not, or to “fix” them because you don’t want to look at the plank in your own eye. I need to practice kindness and hospitality, I need to love God and others. Most of all, I need to love myself—I am enough, just as I am. I can do anything with God’s help—even get through a pandemic.

Yesterday, we collected items for those who are the most vulnerable in our society. The people of Holy Cross enabled others to give without judgment, to show love and hospitality to strangers we will never meet. I hope, if Jesus asks by what measure this generation of the people of God shall be compared, the opportunities we have been given in this pandemic to reflect and correct, will allow Jesus to say we have practiced what he taught us. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me...” Jesus said. “...for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

Right now, we all need rest from hurrying up and waiting, from looking for things we want other people to be doing, and rest so that we might renew our courage to take on the work that we have been given—to love God and to love each other. Once we experience and accept the gift of love, we can make a commitment to try to see, and know, and love people as best we can. As my friend Laurie recently said to me, *“We all need to hear “I see you, I know you, and I love you,” and I try to approach every relationship with that intent.”* I think Laurie is onto something here, and I hope I can follow that path as well, because there is truth, and a little wisdom in that. Amen

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Zechariah 9:9-12, Psalm 145:8 15, Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4502 Jennifer T. Kaalund, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Iona College in NY, had this to say about