

Pentecost XI – August 8, 2021 – Church of the Ascension, Chicago
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In nomine+

For a period of four weeks in Year B, our lectionary diverts us from the Gospel of Saint Mark to that of Saint John. But it is more specific than that. It is exclusively on the sixth chapter of the Gospel which is filled with narratives which draw us not just to the person of Jesus as we would expect from the synoptics, but more profoundly toward the purpose of Jesus and the theological and soteriological truths which he carries in his person and in his teaching. To be tasked with preaching all four weeks is not an enviable assignment, and I am grateful to have only a single swipe at it in this round.

We recall that the occasion for launching of this instruction effort began with the feeding of the 5,000 from five loaves and two fish. This was followed by Jesus' walking on water (for the disciples) and mysteriously translocating to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (for the crowd) whose interest had already been attracted by the healings in Capernaum. Through a series of statements, Jesus elevates the meaning of the earthly bread which the crowd sought to the bread from heaven which only the Son could give. His next extraordinary claim was that he was that bread that came down from heaven and by the same dialectic brought even more claims to light; that he could give eternal life to those who came to him; that none would be turned away; the God was his father and had placed this power in his hands; that he himself was the bread of life that came down from heaven; that the bread that he would give for the life of the world was his flesh! Extraordinary!

This series of statements, each building upon or elaborating on the one before, reveal to the spiritually hungry and willing, that Jesus is the Son of God; that he has come into the world to save the world from itself and from sin and death. This, of course, is that kind of statement with which everyone here already agrees. It is part of our catechesis and constantly reinforced by the liturgy and proclamation of that message wherever Christians gather. We do not need to be re-convinced for four weeks every three years..... I hope!

But, we do seem to need a reminder every so often that this unwarranted and unimaginable gift of God from God, this gift of a Savior who gives life to the world, brings with it certain obligations and expectations. Our other two passages this morning invite us to recall just what some of those obligations really are.

Moses, in what has been regarded as his farewell address to the Children of Israel says: "This entire commandment that I command you today you must diligently observe..... He refers, of course to the covenant God made with the Children of Israel at Sinai. God's love, care and providence was guaranteed or a word no longer much used, vouchsafe, by their diligence in obedience to the Ten Commandments and their ancillary refinements. A failure to comply was answered with a withdrawal the covenantal promises. That's the nature of a covenant. The Israelites were not great at compliance. On several occasions, we are told, the whole nation was saved from total annihilation, only by Moses' plea for mercy on their behalf. The message is clear. Well-being is inextricably tied to diligence and obedience to promises made, on both sides.

The Apostle Paul relies heavily on the Exodus Covenant when he offers his own parenthesis in our Ephesians reading this morning. Some of his sources are obvious, don't lie and don't steal figure prominently in his list. There is a warning against anger, which Jesus related to murder; and more than ample warnings against malicious gossip and petty squabbling are to be found in the Wisdom literature and are frankly illustrated in many of the stories of the Old Testament. That covenant is still very much a part of our Christian obligation.

It's probably good to be reminded now and again that in the Sermon of the Mount Jesus said: "For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matt 5:12-20)

What does emerge in St. Paul's instructions is a different source for Christian moral and ethical behavior. It is based on a new and one might easily say additional commandment; to love one another as Jesus loved. From this source, with Paul, we find a new and different motivation and rationale being promulgated. It is one derived from a common vision of a kinship based on love of God through Christ and love and care for one another. Because of what Jesus has done for us, we do not wish to grieve the Holy Spirit. Because we are bound together in love, we do not wish to weaken or harm the community into which we have been admitted, and we all are obliged, obligated by our baptismal promises, to diligently adhere to those principles, duties and goals.

Several years ago, out in the country where I was rector of a small parish, a fad swept through the region, and suddenly everyone was wearing and giving little woven bracelets emblazoned with the letters W.W.J.D. They were pretty cheap to buy and came in every color of the rainbow so you could easily match the hues of whatever your chosen look-of-the-day might be. I had several of them given to me, though I have to admit, I was not at all diligent in wearing them. They seemed to be especially popular among teenagers.

The idea, I was told, was that, when in doubt about making a moral or ethical decision, one was supposed to ask themselves: "What Would Jesus Do?" The presumed answer that would result would be something like: "Go ye and do likewise." The fad's life-span was brief, much shorter than the hula hoop --- maybe half a year. I noticed one day, that one of my teenage acolytes, who had been particularly vociferous in his support of the movement, was no longer wearing the prescribed bracelet. So, I asked him what had changed. He said that it just didn't work for him. I asked if it was because it was too difficult to know what Jesus would do in his high school world with its teenage pressures. His answer surprised me, and why wouldn't it. He was a teenager, after all! He said that understanding what Jesus would do wasn't really the problem. The problem was that he realized that he just didn't want to do it. It was too hard!

I suspect that if most of us examine our consciences we will find that knowing what Jesus would do in many of our lives is not very difficult for us, either. I think I know what Jesus would have me do when I encounter crabby or mentally disturbed people on the bus. I think I know what Jesus would have me do when I live comfortably while so many beg for food, clothing and housing.

I think I know what Jesus would have me do when I encounter systematic injustice and clear, malicious falsehoods in the rhetoric of my city, state and nation. Do I need to go on? I can even tell you the excuses and rationalizations I use to self-justify my failure to act. But, you probably have a lot of the same ones. You don't really need to hear mine.

Our collect brings us the guidance and wisdom we need to keep us diligent and obedient if not always compliant. "Grant us, Lord, we pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that we, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen."

Although we may not be able to do what Jesus would have us do in all things, there is plenty that we can do and must do if we are truly grateful for the assurance of salvation which has been promised to us. Diligence and obligation to Jesus' teachings, fueled by committed and earnest striving may be all we have to offer. For myself, I have to believe that it will be for now, until I can do better.

Amen.