

Sermon June 7, 2015 I Samuel 16:1-13 Mark 2:23-3:6
"God's Deeper Understanding"

Long ago, a public sinner was excommunicated and forbidden to enter his church. He took his woes in prayer to God. "They won't let me in, Lord, because I am a sinner." God replied, "What are you complaining about? They won't let me in, either!" (Old story, variously shared)

Behind the humor of this little tale there is a painful piece of truth. Too often humanity has taken religion and nailed its doors tightly shut to other people and to God by grasping our narrow understandings with strangling strength. By this, what was intended to be life-producing can become life-reducing, and God is not served.

In the Islam tradition the story is told that Mullah Nasruddin found a diamond by the roadside, but according to the Law, finders could become keepers only if they first announced their find in the center of the marketplace on three separate occasions. Now Nasruddin was too religious to disregard the Law and too greedy to run the risk of parting with his find. So on three consecutive nights, when he was sure that everybody was fast asleep, he went to the center of the marketplace and there announced in a soft voice, "I have found a diamond on the road that leads to the town. Anyone knowing who the owner is should contact me at once."

No one was the wiser for the Mullah's words, of course, except for one man who happened to be standing at his window on the third night and heard the Mullah mumble something. When he attempted to find out what it was, Nasruddin replied, "I am in no way obliged to tell you. But this much I shall say: Being a religious man, I went out there at night to pronounce certain words in fulfillment of the Law." He had followed the letter, but not the intent, of the Law.

What does it mean for us to be part of a church and to keep the Sabbath holy? Growing up in the South, I often heard folks express their opinions about what it meant to be Christian. Most had ideas about what Christians should not do: don't drink, don't dance, don't gamble, don't play cards, don't swear, don't go into a Catholic church, don't go into a Protestant church, don't eat meat on Friday... But there were some "do's": do go to church every Sunday, do cover your head before entering church (my early Episcopal days), do say grace at meals, do give money to the church, do let people know that you're a good Christian. Church was important to the community in which I grew up, there's no doubt about it. (pause) Even so, there was great competition between churches... "I'm Baptist, and you're Episcopalian. You're going to hell because only Baptists are saved." "I'm Catholic, and you're not. My mother says people who aren't catholic won't go to heaven." And it was worse than that. You see, I grew up in suburban Birmingham, Alabama. In spite of our diligent church attendance, I and my contemporaries and my parents' and their contemporaries too often failed to see much connection between what Jesus taught and our society's comfort with the oppression of darker-skinned people. Religion could warm our hearts and make us happy that we belonged to God, but too often it didn't make much difference in our ethnic jokes, in the skimpy wages we handed our maids, or in our political decisions. Many folks just didn't see that it should.

Fortunately for us all, God does not leave God's children in a swamp of self-deception for very long. Throughout history God has raised up prophets of all kinds to challenge human perspectives and to let us realize how frail and shortsighted our vision can be. For it is a fact: God's understanding cannot be approached or apprehended by human understanding. We never know the whole story, we cannot discern fully another person's thoughts or motives or pain...the dynamics of life are too complex for us to grasp as God can do.

An example of this is found in the lesson from I Samuel. Earlier, in the ninth chapter of Samuel, Saul, the first king of Israel, had been considered remarkable because of his stature and strength. As he served as king, however, his weakness of character became apparent. He suffered from depression/melancholia, he was driven to try to kill young David because of jealousy and fear of him, and finally, having lost relationship with God, King Saul ended up taking his own life so as not to be dishonorably killed when his forces faced utter defeat. Saul had seemed perfect for the job, by human standards, and yet he ended up such a failure that God had to replace him.

Today's lesson showed God directing priest Samuel in the search for the next king. Eliab, one of the sons of Jesse, looked totally right for the role, Samuel thought, but God told him to disregard appearance: "...for the Lord sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." (16:7) And thus it was that finally David, the youngest son of Jesse, was chosen.

God sees the heart. God sees beyond ritual, beyond religious words, beyond our facades and pretenses, all the way into our hearts. Even knowing how ambivalent and uncertain we really are about everything from God to our neighbor and ourselves, God for some reason has declared us to be precious. God constantly works to help our hearts become aware of and open to more and more of God's perspective. As we allow God to work.

The religious authorities of Jesus's day were not able to see beyond Jesus' violation of what they understood to be holy rules. For them keeping a strict Sabbath defined them as Jews and set them apart from non-Jews, and thus made a tangible, undeniable statement of obedience to God. Even though Jesus appealed to the record of King David himself breaking a holy rule, the authorities were too threatened by Jesus' attitudes and claims about his own authority. So, gospel-writer Mark says, they "immediately" consulted with the Herodians to plan how to destroy Jesus. It is possible that by holding this meeting they *themselves* ended up breaking the Sabbath!

God's people have always had a tendency to take what God gives, something life-enabling, life-producing, and make something narrow and life-reducing out of it. It seems to boil down to a basic question: How do we best honor God as we use what God has given us? How do we honor God as we use the Law given to us through Moses and Jesus? How do we honor God as we use our individual talents, time and energy? How do we honor God as we enjoy the freedom of speech and other benefits we have in this nation? How do we best honor God as we decide how to utilize medical and technological advances? Our view of this world has broadened as we've been able to view it from thousands of miles away...and yet we seem unable to get food to hungry children

in stricken countries, and we still have trouble accepting folks of different religions or customs. We have medical capability to overhaul and protect the human body in countless ways, and yet we remain unable to change a person's heart from hatred to love.

How do we make sure we are making the best choices, since we are so frail in our wisdom or perspective? The best way is to use Jesus' commandment as a plumbline: "Love the Lord your God with all you are, and love your neighbor as you do yourself." This involves asking with every decision "Am I loving God and loving others and loving myself by this action?" This is actually a way to pray, to ask God for guidance and wisdom, that in all that you do you may be faithful.

Here's a story.

Once a congregation was intrigued by the fact that their rabbi disappeared each week on the eve of the Sabbath. They suspected he was secretly meeting the Almighty, so they chose one of their number to follow him. This is what the man saw: the rabbi disguised himself in peasant clothes and served a paralyzed Gentile woman in her cottage, cleaning out the room and preparing a meal for her. When the spy got back, the congregation asked, "Where did the rabbi go? Did he ascend to heaven?" "No," the man replied, "he went even higher." (from old Jewish story, found in several forms on Internet)

We are God's people, God's children. We do not see all that God sees, or understand what God understands. We tend to go by appearances and too often miss the heart. We are given guidelines, such as the Laws of Moses and Jesus, to help us walk through life in a life-producing manner. But we are called to understand that the rules are meant to facilitate our relationship with God, they are helps for us to grow in understanding of a God who, when it comes to the bottom line, simply loves us. This God of deeper understanding knows each of us, and calls us closer to him every day.

May this be for you the true meaning of Sunday worship, holy communion, and every other aspect of our religion: Not that you appear holy or properly religious to somebody, but that by your attendance to worship and every other rule-gift of God you grow into more meaningful relationship with the One who has given even his life for you. Let us love God, let us love ourselves, let us love others. By this, by God's grace and mystery, we will "ascend even higher"! Thanks be to God! Amen.