

Christ the Lord Episcopal Church      Pinole, CA

Labor Day Sunday

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: September 1, 2024

“Forbidden Love”

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Good morning and welcome to Christ the Lord Church on this Labor Day weekend and fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost. I'm going to start with a little bit of pop culture, which some of you may know, but if you don't, you will still get the point.

Currently there is a television show call “Forbidden Love” which features cultural and religiously diverse relationships and marriages. For example: a Christian wife with a Muslim husband, a Catholic fiancé with an Orthodox Jewish partner, and many others. The show brings to light how we grow up into a faith, or accept one of the various traditions, and how this becomes our reality.

When you have two people who love each other, as is shown in this series, the internal struggle to convert to another faith or agree to accept each other as they are, has serious consequences. I want to mention that for most of the scenarios it is the women who get the raw end of the deal: having to cover themselves from head to toe, or obey their husbands in ways that are foreign to their heritage, including censorship of speech.

So, we begin in the Old Testament today where the laws of God are being prescribed by Moses. And we need to note that the anxieties around the emphasis on obedience in this reading is to understand Deuteronomy's awareness of speaking to people who need structure and identity.

Characterized by the wilderness of wandering after their domination in Egypt and their wildness during exile (which included worshiping idols,) the presented “statutes and ordinances” provide the help of recovery and rehabilitation for a people who can easily slip back into their old and comfortable but harmful practices.

But those ordinances and standards taken to the extreme, as I have witnessed, can inflict great pain and stress on family relationships. For the families of my TV series, as for those in today’s scripture, just going about a ritual or rite does not put spiritual grace into the practice. It takes a whole heart and mind to fully grasp the love of God. For love is what is at the core of all our worship and relationships.

The Pharisees and scribes noticed that some of Jesus’ disciples “were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them”. The text continues with a parenthetical explanation, that the Pharisees, “and all the Jews” follow “the tradition of the elders” by washing their hands thoroughly before they eat. The “tradition of the elders” refers to oral interpretations of the Mosaic law, which the Pharisees and scribes as noted in our Deuteronomy reading considered authoritative.

So we now have two sets of standards being put forth: as the Pharisees consider the flesh and Jesus attends to the spiritual. And it is Jesus who is opening up the vastness of God, the spiritual nature of our very being. The laws were written for humans to help them. God has no need for ordinances and they are not to be used to divide or deliver power.

One of the “Forbidden Love” couples is a Muslim woman and her Pentecostal Christian fiancé. The Christian gentleman’s father was a pastor. The forceful nature of all the fiancé’s relatives and especially the pastor was unbelievable. It

got to the point where the young woman took her fiancé aside and stated, “I think I have committed a great sin against Allah” for allowing your father to pray over me the way he did and anointing me with oil.”

The heartbreak and social bonds that will need to be broken due to a lack of acceptance is a far greater sin than choosing to live side by side with someone who believes in the same God with a similar moral compass but practices those beliefs differently. Knowing this, we see what is truly important in having a relationship with God. Jesus responds with a rebuke from Isaiah, which changes the direction of the conversation: Jesus states, “This people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” Jesus calls them “hypocrites,” because they “abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition”. This is a condemnation of the scribes’ and Pharisees’ distortion of tradition in order to circumvent the law. Jesus is not rejecting the law; in fact, he is rebuking them for their failure to uphold it. As Jesus demonstrates, the law is not there to criticize or harm, but to promote health, healing and love. We are all sinners, we have all made mistakes, we all need to be gentle in our judgment and strong in our ability to forgive. As the Pharisees were unclean in many ways, as they had taken it upon themselves to judge and speak for God.

Even with regards to the scribes and Pharisees, the issue at hand is not that of ritual purity, or even of what traditions Jesus’ disciples ought to follow or not. The issue is the state of the human heart. Jesus brings up the matter of the heart with his quotation of Isaiah: the hearts of “this people” are far from God. “This people,” (it becomes clear in verse 14) includes not just the scribes and Pharisees.

As Mark writes, “Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand.” Jesus is speaking here to all who are gathered around him, including, presumably, the sick whom he had just healed and the

people who had carried them to him. What they must understand is that it is not what you take into yourself that renders you impure, but rather “the things that come out are what defile.”

However one approaches God is not to be judged, as there are many variations in all of creation. If I were to set several of you aside as Episcopalians and ask exactly what that means to you and how you practice, you would have some similar responses and still others that varied greatly. The practice is not as important as the spirit and mental attitude you have when you come to the Lord.

We live in a very diverse and complex world. Whether one wears a hijab or scarf-covered head, the Star of David, the plain clothes of the Amish, the rich tapestry of the Catholic copes, or the simplicity of the doctoral preacher’s robe, is not what is important. It is not about what you see, what you wear, what you eat, or even if you wash hands (which by the way we prefer), but rather the lived experience. It is what you do, how you act, how you talk, how you live the Gospel that matters. And hopefully the joy in your heart and the peace in your mind will speak louder than words when you interact with another person. Let us find unity in our diversity and let us come to God with a clean heart.

As the Epistle of James reminds us. “You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness. Therefore, rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.” Amen