

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

Austin, Texas

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

August 30, 2009

Proper 18 (Year B): Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

Good morning, and welcome to Back to School Sunday, when we celebrate another school year's beginning, in our community and in our church.

As I shared a few weeks back, the wide playground of Lexington Elementary School, sat at the open end of my dead end street in Monroe, Louisiana, and I remember flashes of my first day of Kindergarten there. I remember standing outside the kitchen screen door with my backpack on my shoulders, my mother, in her robe, leaning underneath the kitchen cabinets to remind me that it was still too early to start my walk to class. There were three concrete steps leading out of that kitchen and into our carport's smooth concrete floor, still wet and slick with that morning's dew. I held tight to the metal handrail at the steps' side, and I could hear *The Electric Company* playing for my oldest, younger sister on the den television.

Our next-door-neighbors, the Mazziottis, had two children: a boy, three or four years older than I and an elementary school veteran, and a girl, my same age. I remember Mrs. Mazziotti walking her children to our driveway, and John, the older brother, being instructed to walk his sister, Anna, and I to school. I do not remember if I ran once we reached the small concrete bridge that crossed the ditch surrounding the schoolyard like a moat, but I hope that I did. I remember walking into Mrs. Miller's classroom, just across the hallway from my Aunt Susan's Kindergarten room, the same room where, last week, she started her thirty-fifth year of teaching.

The details from that point are lost to time (or wherever such details go) but I still – *clearly* – remember my excitement, an emotion arising from the core of me, so strong that I feared my smile might rip my cheeks.

This last Monday, Missy and I walked our son, Michael, to his first day of Kindergarten. At bedtime the night before, Michael shared with Missy that he had written five jokes that he was memorizing in order to help him break the ice with his classmates and “make new friends.” His sense of humor remains a work in progress. His first joke: “Why did the ballplayers go to the baseball field?...To play a game of baseball!”

So the next morning, with parents and children descending on Casis' side streets like speeders piling up around the Mos Eisley Cantina on nickel beer night, we parked somewhere near Cedar Park and began the trek to his classroom. I was still moving a step slow from a full weekend. As a family, we had driven thirteen-and-a-half hours through near constant rain on Friday and enjoyed a full weekend of church on Saturday and Sunday. With the parish's Program Year approaching, as we walked I realized that I had thought a great deal more about our new, evening worship service than I had considered this moment: my son, going to his first day of school. I looked down at him, holding his hand, and wondered if he had noticed. I

wondered what, thirty years from now, he would remember about this morning, and I wondered what he felt, his heart becoming, increasingly, a mystery to me.

As it turned out, Missy and I were not nearly the effective guides John had been for Anna and me. We successfully scaled the hill through the playground (following the largest horde of people), only to find ourselves far away from Room 123, where Mrs. Robertson was waiting for her new students to arrive. The classroom, when we discovered it, was, oddly enough, at the end of the hallway on the right, just as mine had been. The walls were the slick interior brick and painted cinder blocks familiar to me from the schoolhouses of my youth. The whole morning was drenched in *déjà vu*, but I was, decidedly, through the looking glass now: standing outside the classroom instead of sitting in it; leaving as the bell rang, instead of scurrying to my desk.

Our lessons this morning present two related, but distinct ideas of Godly living: one, from Deuteronomy, which I mark as adherence to law; and the second, from Mark's Gospel, which I want to distinguish as fidelity to principle.

In the lesson from Deuteronomy, Moses stands with Israel on the border of the Promised Land, the country they are preparing to inhabit, and he describes the importance of neither adding nor subtracting from the "statutes and ordinances" of God (Deuteronomy 4:1, 5, 8). Moses demands a strict adherence to the law he catalogues, and there's a lot to which the people of Israel are being required to make their assent. He says to the people, "You must observe [these statutes and ordinances] diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people?'" (Deuteronomy 4:5-8).

During a time in which Israel would find itself in the near company of an unknown people, Moses sets forth adherence to the law as the primary means to distinguish itself from the native nations with whom they would come in contact, as well as the primary means of witnessing their relationship to God. This is how Israel will know itself and how Israel will be known to others. Surely, Moses does not intend blind or empty adherence, but just as surely he privileges following the law before any fidelity to those laws' principles might allow any individual rule to be broken.

And then there's Jesus, this Jesus who makes breaking the law a predictable pattern of behavior. Jesus touches the lepers, feeds the hungry on the Sabbath, and keeps company with the Gentiles. And, in today's lesson from Mark, Jesus does not rebuke his disciples for failing to follow the purity laws governing the handling of their food. In response, the Pharisees press him, saying, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" (Mark 7:5). That is to say: "We have received the law of Moses, and we know what it requires. We have received the traditions of the generations who have raised us, and we know how to follow them. How can you call yourself Godly and yet live like this? Even worse, Teacher, how can you let your disciples live like this and allow themselves to be deluded into thinking themselves Godly, too?"

In response, Jesus invites the leaders of the synagogues to consider the posture of their hearts and not only of their actions. In the New Revised translation, the Isaiah text he quotes reads, "The Lord said...these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote" (Isaiah 29:13). Simply stated, their heart's not in it, and they live by rote rather than by faith.

Jesus calls them to consider their hearts first, before their behavior: “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile...For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come” (Mark 7:14-15, 21). So, too, I would offer, it is that same locus – our hearts – from which our best intentions emerge.

According to Jesus, it is not that we are irrevocably bound by the same and particular statutes and ordinances Moses described to God’s people while they stood on the edge of the Promised Land; rather it is that we are called to live – as they did – orderly lives, lives ordered by the One who created us, redeemed us, and sustains us still. And, according to Jesus, that orderliness should emerge from our interior – from the core of what God made and intended – and not from any given rule.

Indeed, whereas Moses called God’s people to a strict adherence to the law, Jesus calls us instead to a fidelity to principle, the principles of his ministry which he summarizes: “to love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind...[and] to love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37-39). To distill this teaching even further, Jesus calls us to live by *love*.

In the broadest brushstrokes, then, whereas Moses called God’s people to simple conformity, Jesus calls us instead to love, and to love faithfully, from the inside, out.

Jesus commends the Pharisees to give up their identities as determined by the law, and to live instead by faith, challenging them to tend with constancy the *principles* of covenant fidelity, preparing themselves for the necessity that the living expression of their faithfulness will require new statutes and new ordinances as their living situation changes. The template remains unchanged, then, but the application across time of what a relationship with God requires of the covenant community’s faithful members necessarily adapts to the changing conditions of the communities’ changing historical contexts.

According to the model of Jesus, being faithful to God requires that we – *faithfully* – will change how we define and organize ourselves as God’s people. According to the model of Jesus, being faithful to God requires that we – *faithfully* – will reject and ignore some of the elders’ traditions. According to the model of Jesus, being faithful to God requires that we not allow ourselves to simply “by rote” do as we have always done without considering the reason for our behavior and the current situation in which we are seeking fidelity. And, according to the model of the Pharisees, this process will likely be difficult.

As Mrs. Robertson shut the door to her classroom, I remembered standing in scrubs outside of the operating room doors on the day that Michael was born. I am increasingly maudlin about all things involving my children (and, for that matter, all things involving any and all children), and this moment was no different. On Monday I cried in that hallway as I had wept in the hospital some five-and-a-half years before, and, if there were not so many people around and a three-year-old little girl to ready for her own first day of preschool, I could have leaned against one of those smooth brick walls and sobbed until all my tears were cried. As inevitable and even wonderful as change is when watching one’s children grow up, Monday was a mess of emotions: love and guilt, pride and fear, helplessness and hope. This new situation charged me to change on so many levels and I was simply not prepared for it. I hurt, being tugged so swiftly

and so strongly in so many new and different directions. Perhaps the Pharisees, even with their sharp-tongues and encumbered motives, perhaps even they hurt when considering the challenge of Jesus' teaching.

When he came home from school, Michael shared that he had met another boy, Michael M. (he being Michael A.), and that Michael M. told him that they would be best friends forever. Maybe it was the jokes. Despite our prodding, our Michael was otherwise not forthcoming with information concerning his day.

I don't have any idea about the particular "statutes and ordinances" of how to be the father of a Kindergartner, much less an adolescent, much less a teenager. So, while I am not naive enough to believe that the particular rules of what we've learned raising Michael to this point will be uniformly useful, neither am I willing to give away from that experience what I have come to appreciate of parenthood's broader principles. Namely, that I want my child to know that he is loved. I want him to know that *I* love him, and that the God who created him knows and loves every hair on his sweet head. And that when he finds – perhaps so, or perhaps not – that he and Michael M. will not be best friends forever, whatever particular orderliness his new life and our life with him will require, I pray it will be nothing less than Love governing the order.

As this fresh season of our church's life begins, we stand at the edge of a new "Promised Land"...and the inevitability of change awaits us. I suspect that, on occasion, the tug and the stretch of those changes will challenge us, maybe even wound us in our desire to be faithful. Moreover, I am confident that we, working together to be God's people, will make a mistake or two or three along the way. And when those moments arrive, I invite us to search our hearts and not simply our habits, seeking a vital fidelity before a simple conformity with "the way things have always been." I pray that in these days upcoming we will be gracious to one another and to our God and that, together, we may make a commitment to the deeper principles of Jesus' ministry as our guide, namely that love – *love* – would preside over this parish family and the communities we serve. That by Love we will know ourselves, and by love we would make our witness to the world.