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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
8/30/2015, Pentecost 14B, Lectionary 22
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9, James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-15, 21-23
Seeing the Forest For the Trees

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁹And [Jesus] said to them, “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!
¹⁰For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’ . . .
(Mark 7:9-10, RSV)

This morning’s Bible lessons cry out for a sermon on “Seeing the Forest for the Trees.” These Bible texts ask us to not lose sight of the main matter. Christianity is about love. It is about relationships — good relations even with strangers and enemies. Our faith cherishes people. That’s what Jesus does: He cherishes people, our world, and all of life.

In our Epistle Lesson, St. James reminds us that to be a “hearer” of God’s word, but not a “doer of the word” is not enough. It is to fail the call of love in our lives.

In our First Lesson, Moses urges us to neither “add to the word which I command you, nor take from it.” Why? Why is it so important to Moses that the holy commandments of God not be modified — neither increased nor taken away from? The answer, my friends, is that *love* is at stake. Moses is trying to guard God’s way of love in this world. The holy commandments mark out the path of love for us, and Moses does not want us to miss the path because we have become preoccupied with lesser things. To disregard God’s holy commandments in favor of human notions is to be like some dogged hiker who walks along the rim of the Grand Canyon and never actually notices the scene because he is so intent on looking for the signs posted by the park rangers. It is a poor exchange to trade the beauty of God’s Word, which only teaches and asks love of us, for the poor porridge of human notions and passions.

In this sermon, I mean to speak of a lovely example of *seeing* the forest for the trees, followed by a terrible example of *missing* the forest for the trees. Then I want to end up by saying a few words about the relationship between God’s holy will for humanity and the love that follows the pattern of Jesus. This is a rather complicated matter, and I don’t think I’ve ever really had much success in trying to explain it. Usually people just look at me with blank faces after I have tried my best to speak of a subject that I think is really important. But in this sermon I mean to give it another good try. To set the stage a little, let me say that everyone believes in love — not just in the church but most people across the globe believe in love. But what is the connection between love and the holy will of God for us — a will that often constrains us and forbids us and even seems sometimes to

make life poorer? My theme is that it is best to stick with God’s will, even if we can hardly make sense of it, even if our hearts should feel as if they are breaking — because to depart from God’s will is in the end to depart from the path of love.

Anyway, let’s begin with the lovely story of seeing the forest for the trees. I have included this fun photo¹ in this morning’s worship folder:



As the young people say, this photo has “gone viral.” It shows a couple who were admitted to separate rooms in a Georgia hospital. But the nurses – bless ‘em – bent the rules a bit and reunited them. There they are holding hands, as they have probably done most of their lives.

Earlier this month I celebrated the two-year anniversary of my open-heart surgery. I am grateful for that surgery in many ways. One of my good memories of that time two years ago was my wife, Carol, holding my hand. That’s what we do. A doorman at our building once mentioned that is nice to see Carol and me walking toward the building because we hold hands. So, there I was in the hospital, weak as a kitten, but Carol always seemed to be there, watching over me, holding my hand — knitting, watching, adjusting the pillow, whatever needed to be done. She had plenty of things to do on her own. Her work as Chaplain at the Warburg continued, plus she served as interim pastor here at Immanuel along with Rev. Kelly-Ray Meritt. So, she was busy, but, in her graceful way, she took care of me. It’s an illustration of seeing the forest for the trees — keeping an eye on love. So it was with the elderly couple down in Georgia. Those nurses kept their eye on the main matter. They remembered that love is a great thing on earth.

¹ http://blog.drmurielgillick.com/2015/08/til-death-do-us-part.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+Perspective+On+Aging+%28Perspectives+On+Aging%29

The holy commandment about marriage is phrased in the negative — Thou shalt not commit adultery — but the inner meaning of the commandment is love. Husbands and wives should love and cherish each other, even when they are sick. Those Georgia nurses understood that, and so they bent their hospital regulations in order to honor the love between these two old people. Good for them. This is a great story!

CORBAN

But now let's turn to a terrible story. It is the story raised up by Jesus in this morning's Gospel Lesson. It is the story of Corban! Corban was a legal procedure vulnerable to abuse. Designating assets as "Corban" meant that those assets were now dedicated to some godly use, like a bequest to the temple. What offends Jesus in our Gospel Lesson is that he knows that sometimes people declare their wealth to be Corban as a technique for evading care of their parents. Money that could have been used to provide for their parents is instead reserved for the temple. And the poor parents are left desolate.

Lord have mercy on us humans and the tough circumstances we can find ourselves in. I bet there were people who cried "Corban" because they had reached the end of their rope. They could hardly think of any way forward if they were going to continue supporting their aging parents. But that was a world without the systems of social support that we have. If the children back then abandoned their aging parents, those parents were likely sunk. I can understand how tough our choices can sometimes be. But still, Jesus would have us remember his holy commandment: Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother. To turn away from that commandment somehow always deadens the heart a little bit.

And then there are the rascals who simply cry Corban because they are covetous, overly in love with money, always wanting more and more luxuries, and are willing to cast their parents aside if there should be some legal procedure for doing so. So they cry Corban in their hard-hearted way. Shame on them! There is a God and they must give answer to him one day.

Supporting the temple is a good thing. I believe in that. That's why I give to the church. Throughout our marriage Carol and I have tried to give a tithe to the church. That is a significant amount of money. It meant that sometimes our boys went without some things we would like to have given them. It is a balancing act, like much of life. But what would be wrong would be to give to the church *as a technique* for depriving our children. Likewise, it would be wrong to reserve money for the church *as a technique* for neglecting elderly parents. We are supposed to love our parents. We should not evade the call of God's holy commandments by abusing human traditions and techniques. Jesus expresses this theme by speaking of "voiding" the commandments:

...thus making void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on. (Mark 7:13, RSV)

St. James presses the issue. Forget all avenues of escape, do not even try to evade the demands of love:

²⁷Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world. (James 1:27, RSV)

Thus the apostle asks us to keep our eye on the ball. The main matter for disciples of Jesus is that we should walk in this world as our Maker wants us to walk. That is, we should be people who hunger and thirst for righteousness. We seek no shortcuts. We want no manipulations. We simply want to walk in a way that pleases our good God.

GOD'S WORD vs. LOVE

Now, let me try my hand at speaking of the relationship between the holy will of God for us, which sometimes feel hard for us and constrains us, and the life of love appropriate for those who follow Jesus.

When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandments, he had no trouble answering. He did not hesitate. He did not miss a beat. The commandments are about *love*:

³⁶“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”

³⁷And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

³⁸This is the great and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ⁴⁰On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”

(Matthew 22:36-40, RSV)

The main matter of love is why the photo of the two elderly folks holding hands in the hospital chimes so well in our hearts. If the hospital rules need to be bent a bit in order for those two elderly folks to be together, then bend them! Bend those rules. Do not fail to see the forest for the trees.

Jesus certainly knows the inner meaning of the Ten Commandments, since those commandments come from his hand and express his will. If Jesus summarizes those commandments in terms of love, then love is certainly the heart of those commandments. And so, obeying the commandments for ulterior motives, like to avoid prison or to impress our boss, is good, but not yet as good as it could be. Rather, we should obey the commandments from the heart, with an earnest desire to cherish people and to try to make the world a better place.

On the other hand, we should not let the motive of love “make void” the holy commandments of God — to use the words of Jesus: to “make void” the

commandments. Everyone loves! Everyone *approves* of love. We are built for love, and we can only deaden our souls by turning away from love. And yet, what does “love” mean? The question is the *content* of our love. Maybe it would be safest for us to assume that we simply do not know what “love” means apart from God’s will for humanity. Our God *is* love (1 John). Our God proves his love in the life, death, and resurrection of his only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Our God is the great Master of love, and the best any of the rest of us can do is to try to be faithful students of the Master.

Those who abused Corban might have had good motives — even noble motives as they estimated things. And yet the Commandment says, “You shall honor your mother and your father.” To do less than that is to engage in a failure of love, no matter how noble the motives otherwise.

Let me give you four quick examples from the Bible of “making void” the Word of God for what seem like plausible reasons, but which resulted in disaster. I am thinking, first, of Adam and Eve in the garden. Then of Elisha’s servant who went dashing after Naaman. Then of King Herod and Herodias. And finally of Judas the Betrayer.

Time hastens on. I do not want this sermon to be too long, and so I will say only a word or two about each of these four examples.

First, Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. This is the paradigmatic story of humanity. This is the story of our vulnerability to temptation. When Adam and Eve saw...

that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, [they] took of the fruit thereof, and did eat... (Genesis 3:6, KJV)

The reasons seemed good. The food was good, pleasant to the eyes, makes one wise. But departing from the will of God was a failure of love for God, with much misery following.

Second, the story of Elisha and Naaman was one of our Vacation Bible School stories this past week (2 Kings 5). The prophet Elisha commanded the Syrian General Naaman to wash himself seven times in the River Jordan, with the result that Naaman was healed of his leprosy. A small detail in that story is that, in gratitude, Naaman wanted to weigh Elisha down with gifts, which Elisha refused. So, Naaman went on his way. But Elisha’s servant seemed to have thought this was nonsense and secretly dashed after Naaman and got himself some of those gifts. It must have made sense to the man. No harm done, he figured. Except that in making void the word of the prophet, the servant had been disloyal to his master and had misrepresented the grace of God to the Syrian.

My third quick example is the story of King Herod and his wife Herodias. They felt they could do *anything* for love. “Get out of our way!” they seemed to say. “We are in love!” But the result was misery and death, with the ruining of two families and the beheading of St. John the Baptist.

And finally, there was Judas. The Bible itself says that his motives were low in betraying Jesus. The Bible said that Judas did not care for the poor, but rather, was a thief (John 12:6). Still, the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* suggested that Judas had high motives in betraying Jesus, and, interestingly, some Bible scholars make the same claim. What I say is, let it be so! Let it be the case that Judas had noble reasons for betraying Jesus. Nonetheless, we should not go around betraying our Master! Let us not depart from the will of God for humanity lest in the process we depart from the ways of love.

Put in the positive: If ever you and I become persuaded of something concerning the will of God, let's up and do it. Let us not be simply "hearers of the Word, but doers thereof."

The holy will of God is our great teacher about how to walk in the paths of love. The holy will of God *is* the holy will of Jesus for us — Jesus, that great Man and God of love, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.