

15th Sunday after Pentecost
Sermon 9.2.18
Scripture:

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you. ²You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you. ⁶You must observe them 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!" ⁷For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? ⁸And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? ⁹But take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children—

Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, ²they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. ³(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; ⁴and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) ⁵So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?" ⁶He said to them, "Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁷in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines." ⁸You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." ¹⁴Then he called the crowd again and said to them, "Listen to me, all of you, and understand: ¹⁵there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile." ²¹For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, ²²adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. ²³All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

The sign outside Dave's Sporting Goods on North Street in Pittsfield announces what you can find inside: "Guns. Mace. Pepper Spray. Tick Spray. Mosquito Nets. Camo."

Driving by, I mentally catalogued what I've got in my bag, in my car, at the ready. It included none of those things. "Wow," I said to Tobias, who was in the passenger seat. "Those people have protection from everything."

Tobias knows this habit of thinking of mine well. Fourteen years living with me, he knows all my lines of critique. "I'm sure there's plenty of sunscreen in there too," he said, joining in dryly.

"Right? Just put on a shirt, or sit in the shade, or accept some free Vitamin D. But seriously," I said to him, "I can't imagine feeling so potentially under attack all the time."

"I know you can't, Mom," he said.

Was he just humoring me?

And I realize not assuming a defensive posture in the world is largely about being lucky enough never to have had to, which is the case with me. The fact is, I've never been under attack—neither in any grand, historical way (always living where we take our wars to other shores) or in any personal way (always living in households that were steady and reliable and, if aggressive, then only passively so). Even the tick bites I've suffered have been over quickly, haven't resulted in Lyme. Even the mosquito bites I've suffered have been annoying but not deadly, as I know they can be elsewhere. Even the gunfire in my neighborhood a couple weeks ago, which had terrible effect on both the shooter and the one shot and all the people closest to each, didn't creep in effect up the slope to my backyard. I'm reminded of Donald Glover's song and video, *This Is America*, which he produced under his rap name Childish Gambino. The lyrics go: ““This is America. Don't catch you slippin' up. Look how I'm livin' now. Police be trippin' now. Yeah, this is America, guns in my area...I gotta carry 'em.” I get it, but it's not so for me. Really, all is well here.

I wonder though if it's not just lucky circumstance that has my defenses down, because a lot of the people I see in a defensive crouch don't actually seem to be under attack. I wonder if it's also all the Sundays I've spent listening to the likes of Jesus.

It's not unusual that we should find Jesus taking issue with scribes and Pharisees, or them taking issue with him. What's unusual about this time is that these religious authorities have come all the way from Jerusalem. This might suggest they'd come looking for a fight.

They would have it. It would be over why Jesus' disciples didn't wash their hands before eating.

This, of course, is a good thing to do—to wash your hands before eating. But nowhere in the Torah does it say one must. It's not part of the Law, though it was apparently a part of the custom that had become attached to the Law. And this is the heart of Jesus' argument with the religious authorities' argument with him, the Law of God, which had become confused with the traditions of man.

I've often focused on his accusation of hypocrisy, quoting as he did Isaiah to back up the claim: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” I've focused on that most likely because it makes an easy preaching point. I mean, hypocrisy is everywhere, among the religious, among the politically active, among humans in general, and it's always outrageous. But in focusing on that, I've missed the second part of Jesus' point, which is the second part of

Isaiah's prophesying: "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." I've skipped this most likely because I haven't spent time thinking about what this distinction could actually mean, what the difference could actually be other than their source.

But this week, something came to me. Outside Dave's Sporting Goods, something occurred. Could it be that the Law as given by God is in order to protect others from "yourself," while the human tradition that became attached to the Law is about protecting yourself from the world?

Or is perhaps too broad to understand it thus, that God's Law is mostly to protect the neighbor from the self, while human convention is all about protecting the self from the world—keeping yourself clean, keeping yourself pure, keeping yourself safe? Is that fair to say?

I couldn't find commentary to back it up, but that's what strikes me today—that God's Law is to get the one righteous under the Law to regard the neighbor, the stranger, the other, while human convention is as if to protect the one righteous under the Law from everything that seems so very unrighteous.

This is a tough reading for a lot of people because of Jesus' apparently dark view of humanity. He doesn't seem to think too highly of us. As to where to locate the place whence evil comes, Jesus claims it's the human heart. No Satan here to hold to account, no devil that made me do it, "...it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come," Jesus claims *here* at least. That age of old problem of evil: the problem apparently is us.

Tough to hear, this is actually the first piece of scripture I ever preached on that I got push back on from a member of the gathered congregation. It just cut her too deeply. She couldn't abide it, which surprised me at the time because I hadn't heard it as so personally aimed—neither at her nor at anyone in particular; and I still don't. On further reflection, I understood her hurt feeling, and I get it still, so I preach on this with some caution. If this unnerves you, or triggers you in some way, please know this is *not* Jesus' final word on the nature of humanity, on the nature of *you*.

Or, let me try this. Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran pastor in Denver, notable for her unconventional personal presentation. Tattooed and (shall we say) plain of speech, she was a keynote speaker at a conference I attended and she made an off-hand remark about the high anthropology you find in denominations like Unitarianism and like ours (which was her host), the

UCC. These branches of the Protestant movement grew up in times influenced by the philosophical notions of human progress and the “perfectibility of man.” Thus they took up that influence, pursuing things like the social gospel by which God’s kingdom could be fully realized on Earth by all God’s good-doing faithful (or so it was thought). We would establish world peace. We could realize true justice. We would eradicate hunger and act on the inherent dignity of every human and all creation, and every government and every society would sign on with this idealistic aim.

Bolz-Weber explained she just doesn’t share that high anthropology. She’s not so confident that, with our hearts in the right place and good, old-fashioned will power to do the right thing (not to mention a widespread enough understanding of what the right thing is that we must do), we’ll manage to establish God’s reign of shalom in our midst. No, instead of a high anthropology, she finds her faith in a high *Christology*, a high view for Christ has done and is doing in our regard.

Hearing her say as much had me understand my own perspective—that our greatest hope isn’t the human conscience, and acceptance of one another in freedom and responsibility (good as those things are to pursue); no, our highest hope is Christ and the cross of self-giving love, which he took on and which we should discipline ourselves to do as well should it come to that, however it might come to that. This is what “church” is for; this is wherefore Sunday worship, that we might cultivate in ourselves a desire to sacrifice, in small measure and in great, for the sake of God’s truth and love.

A recent book out called *Winners Take All* calls into question the current conviction that all of life can be a positive sum game, that all our engagements can be a matter of “win-win.” With its subtitle, *The Elite Charade of Changing the World*, author Anand Giridharadas takes on the latest generation of Rockefellers and Carnagies, the billionaires whose ruthless business practice and advocating for public policy that serves them best, is all to be thought counterweighted by the charitable foundations they establish in their names, to benefit education or health care or water availability or what have you. Giridharas claims there is no counter-balance to be found here. The injustice done in the amassing of their fortunes isn’t balanced out by the good done with their now massive wealth. And he says one reason we as a society have let this happen again is that we’ve preached too easily the gospel of positive-sum “win-win.” His claim (though perhaps not in these

terms) is that we've got to revisit the notion of sacrifice, of limiting the self for the sake of a greater good, of things costing something to you that might yet benefit the world.

In other words, not every good is win-win, positive-sum. Sometimes what's good is going to cost you.

I felt called to task by this because I often preach against zero-sum thinking, against the notion that if you win that means I lost. I've often claimed that the things of real value aren't so zero-sum as all this. Love, the kingdom of God, the beloved community, grace and good will: these things of God abound the more they abound. But in emphasizing this, I've neglected another crucial preaching point in the life of the Church—that sometimes something will cost you, sometimes you will have to give something up that the realm of God might be more realized amidst the realm of this world. What's more, the more you have in this world, the greater the odds are that you will be asked to give some of it up.

And again, this is what “church” is for; this is wherefore Sunday worship, that we might cultivate in ourselves a desire to sacrifice, in small measure and in great, for the sake of God's truth and love. Otherwise, we're simply too self-interested by nature. We're simply too frightened and self-serving and capable of justifying ourselves without even knowing that's what we're doing. We're too opinionated and imperialistic and ideological and self-deceiving—and not just *you* (lest Jesus' assessment fall too heavily *you*.) This is true of us all.

I remember hearing a conservative thinker once seriously claim that the aim of world peace was the most dangerous aim ever taken on. I was a young adult when I heard this, and it sounded so cynical. I know more now, and it sounds rather credible. It is a quite totalitarian aim when you actually try to establish it for real, and totalitarianism never plays out well, no matter the end to which it's aimed.

The human heart...

Did you notice, about the list of evils that come from within a person and that can defile a person, they correspond with the Ten Commandments? Fornication, licentiousness, and adultery; theft, envy, and avarice; slander, deceit, and wickedness; murder: each of these is accounted for in at least one of the Ten Commandments, those original utterances that give foundation to the whole Law of God: “You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not desire your neighbor's spouse or belongings or accomplishments...” This,

Jesus' recitation of the evils that flow from the human heart: this means that Jesus means to redirect those most concerned with the Law back to the Law whose intent it is to bind the self for the sake of the other, rather than to safeguard the self from what's assumed to be menacing world.

I have to say I'm irritated by what feels like a common assumption that the world is full of threats from which we need protecting, which maybe you already knew, as Tobias clearly did. It's possible I'm not as good at hiding my irritation as I think I am. From the gun-toter who heads out each day prepared to be that "good guy with a gun" whenever all hell breaks loose (as it surely will), to the GOOP-shopper who holds fast to Gwyneth Paltrow's every "wellness" recommendation for staying safe (from free radicals that might otherwise menace your bloodstream, or from the depleting effects of pregnancy that can haunt you for years to come, or from the radiation that being a creature in this solar system can wreck especially on your skin, or from the harm non-organic cotton in your linen sheets could do to your chakras), to the helicopter parent who's sure she or he is the only one who wants the child in question to make it through the day alive, which will only happen with constant vigilance, I don't know where this multivalent sureness comes from that we only ever survive by the skin of our teeth. What I do feel sure of is that the conviction that we are fundamentally unsafe, and even at constant risk, is itself a dangerous one, especially when held by those whose lives are more secure than most lives have ever been.

Remember the suburbanites with their tiki-torches? "You will not replace us," they chanted. "Jews will not replace us," they menaced—and they were mostly white, mostly young, mostly male, mostly educated, mostly not poor, mostly healthy, all of which is to say mostly not under any clear and present threat.

The defensive crouch from which the victors in the last election approach the world is surprising, and distressing. People who study social and political trends have made this useful point: that usually when you hear cries of rigged elections, usually when you hear false accusations against political opponents, usually when you hear the free press condemned as the enemy of the people and whole departments of the government cast into doubt as to their legitimacy, they're coming from those who *lost*. To hear such things, then, coming from those who've won—those who actually won or those whose candidate won—and who now have real and actual access to power is another thing altogether. These winners who yet feel themselves to be losing: they're not just after power, they're after *more* power. They don't just mean to govern; they mean to dominate. They

don't just feel vulnerable, they're *angry* that they're even just a little bit vulnerable—vulnerable though as we all are, as we ever shall be, and all the more so if we splinter apart.

I am not going to live in that world.

I am not going to live in a defensive crouch—a practice I practice, in small silly ways more than in great important ways. But I'm still practicing, still strengthening.

My sister's roommate was a medical student when they lived together, both in their twenties. I was a divinity student at the time, and I went to visit her. I met Wendy, who seemed eager to tell me, "I don't believe in organized religion." I said back, "I don't believe in the germ theory," which was a stupid thing to say because it probably lined up with her assumptions about me, and because I *do* believe in the germ theory, but not to the degree that I'm gonna use anti-bacterial soap. Regular soap will do just fine—and I'll wash my hands before I eat just as an easy way to keep my body healthy. I'll also wash my hands after I use the toilet as an easy way to keep those I interact with healthy, you all as we pass the peace.

The fact is Jesus had interesting things to say elsewhere about the possibility of contagion. As a correction to the Pharisees obsessive sureness that contagion works in such a way that a clean thing can be made unclean with just a drop of defilement, Jesus turns it inside out, confident that a drop of the gospel can be a contagion amidst the world such that by it the world will be transformed, and a kernel of love can be a founding and fixing of love amidst the hostilities of our age such that those hostilities don't stand a chance for domination.

This is how I mean to live, sure not that I need to be bound up in protection from the world but rather that I, any "I," need to be (to a degree) bound for the sake of promoting God's good will to be unleashed. The religious authorities of Jesus' day had got it wrong, the question as to whom the Law is to serve. It wasn't to serve in protection of the righteous from the world, but in protection of the other from the self. Human convention and tradition would come along to see to the wellbeing of the self, but God's Law was about the wellbeing of the other, which would become the wellbeing of all, and because contagion can work the other way too.

And both are good: it's good to take reasonable action to protect yourself from the world's sharp edges and rough terrain. Don't be Little Red Riding Hood, be her older sister who's already been through woods to Grandma's house. Keep your gun, if you have one, in a safe. If you're going for a walk alone, make sure someone knows when to expect you back, and check for ticks

upon return. Eat more vegetables than you do Dorito's—a lot more, and go to the doctor for regular check-ups (while we work as a society to make it so we can all go to the doctor). Get to know your neighbors so you call on them if you need help, and they can call on you. Own a home that has neighbors. Privacy's overrated. A friend of mine from long ago died unexpectedly in her one-bedroom apartment behind a door secured with several locks. She was hard to find once she was gone.

In this vein, it's also good not to make your safety and wellness the highest good. The safest car on the road is probably a Hummer—but it's only safest to the people inside it, while to everyone else it's something of a menace. So in certain sense the safest car on the road isn't a car at all, it's a bicycle.

I'm not going to pretend these distinctions are easy to draw, but it's worth knowing there's a distinction to draw. Jesus didn't always make friends in pointing that out, but he made a friend of me and I'd guess (given that you're here) he's made a friend of you. Following him, then, we might learn where these lines of distinction are for the living of our days. That we might find them and live within them, thanks be to God.