

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Easter 6-A (17 May 2020)

St. Thomas', Glassboro

The Rev. Todd Foster

Time-stamp: <2020-05-16 Sat 20:02>

Collect

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Acts 17:22-31, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21, Psalm 66:7-18

1 Beginning: Once upon a time...

Science has been our friend. Scientific attitudes and practices and discoveries have led to much of the plenty, health, and longevity that many of us enjoy today. Those privileges have been received very unevenly in the world, and few have benefitted as resoundingly as we in the United States.

This makes it shocking for me to see small, vocal groups of protestors demanding policies meant to save lives be rescinded before the science says the job is done. This makes it shocking to see all kinds of groups, gathered around all kinds of issues, ignoring science, ignoring our best understandings of reality, when it doesn't suit them for some reason. I'm talking about anti-vaxxers, fossil fuel companies, and politicians. I'm talking about you and I on those days when we choose to ignore what's true, what's factual, what's healthy, and go our own way instead. We ignore hard-won, scientifically tested information for the sake of material gain, for ideological reasons, or very often for no discernible reason at all!

So while a healthy *skepticism* is the very heart of a scientific worldview, there's a kind of scientific *denialism* that has become destructive, lethal even, hurting people and hurting the world we live in. It's a choice that is made, a collection of choices, that run counter to our best understandings of reality, and arise from nowhere else than an arbitrary expression of human will.

And when we start talking about the destructive tendencies of arbitrary expressions of human will. . . we have then strayed into spiritual territory. We have come, I think, face to face, with exactly what Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel reading.

2 Middle: Tension: destabilizing

First, I'm going to be charitable and suppose Jesus is not saying this in the plaintive voice of a manipulative stereotype.

“Honey? If you loved me. . .”

This featured in the story of Samson and Delilah, but it didn't work out well.

Instead, Jesus is issuing an invitation and an explanation about how the world works. So let's step through this.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” How do you know you love Jesus? Because you keep his commandments. How can you express your love for Jesus? By keeping his commandments. What is the sign of someone who loves Jesus, how can you tell they're a Jesus-lover? Well, you can tell because you see them keeping Jesus' commandments, Jesus' instructions, Jesus' nearly scientific explanations of how the world works.

If you like the house the architect designed, you will build according to her blueprint! If you like Aunt Leann's chocolate chip cookies, you'll follow her recipe. If you want your engine to run again, and as good as new, you'll follow the rebuild instructions in the manual. If you want to taste the best the restaurant has to offer, you'll order the chef's special rather than demanding chicken strips and french fries.

It isn't like Jesus is making a test, demanding obedience or else. This is not a threat or a plea. It's an explanation of how reality works. It's metaphysical or theological science. Jesus' commandments are not arbitrary lists of rules that God uses to see how worthy you may or may not be. Jesus' commandments are, instead, an explanation and an invitation to a way of life that leads into the love of God.

Jesus' commandments, the instructions throughout the Bible, are a recipe for how to *feed your soul*, to nurture within yourself the image of God, to learn to pay attention to the Holy Spirit, and to experience the love of God.

And that's exactly what Jesus says, isn't it? “They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them. ” Do you hear that? The more and better you love Jesus, the more and better you will experience the love of the Father. Not because God will love you any more. But because *you* will be *learning*, forming in yourself a vessel to receive God's love.

If you can appreciate fine music, fine craftsmanship, or fine writing, it's no accident. It's because you have developed within yourself and awareness of, an understanding of, an intellectual engagement of the virtues of music, craftsmanship, or writing. You have learned what it means for these things to be fine or shoddy. You are able to discern quality in them. And when you come across the work of a master, done with careful and joyful execution, your heart too rejoices. It is like a special gift from the artist to you. It is a gift offered to everyone! But only a very few are able to receive, to appreciate the gift. You who have done the hard work of preparing to receive it will find a special joy in the gift that seems to have been created especially for you.

So it is with the love of God. By practicing the “law,” the “commandments,” those things taught by Jesus and the apostles, Moses and the prophets, you and I will develop the capacity to experience God's love more deeply. This is the work of Christian living.

And just what are these commandments by which we may love Jesus? He told us himself: we are to love God. And we are to love our neighbors. These two commandments are the lens, the guide by which we are to understand and interpret all the others. These are the commandments that lead us to worship, to pray, to give thanks. They lead us to stay home, to make phone calls, and to write letters. They lead us to support the good works done by organizations like our churches, like Kitchen of Hope, Family Promise, and Episcopal Relief and Development, among others. We love by encouraging one another and being attentive to the ways that God might bring for us to serve one another. Because it is in that very serving that we will learn to experience God's love.

3 End: Now / not yet; Because God... therefore...

In the end, it turns out that science is an insufficient savior. Science is no match for arbitrary expressions of human will. This is nothing new.

When the Bubonic plague was making one of its passes through Europe in the 14th century, Giovanni Boccaccio said of his neighbors in Florence, Italy: "Some hid in their homes. Others refused to accept the threat. Their way of coping, was drink heavily, enjoy life to the full, go round singing and merrymaking, . . . gratify all of one's cravings when the opportunity emerged, and shrug the whole thing off as one enormous joke."¹

I can understand where that comes from. The dissonance, discomfort, anxiety and frustration I experience with a lack of good information and a lack of clear expectations for what the future may hold makes it hard to live into the demands of our times. It tempts me to deny that which doesn't accord with my personal experience and to try to find comfort in ignoring the bad news.

Whether we're talking about science or the spirit, we still get to make our choices between faith and denialism.

Jesus has explained, clearly, how to avoid falling into the trap of *spiritual* denialism. God's love is already present, at work in your life, just waiting for you to choose to notice. And we learn to notice by making choices to pay attention. By turning our expressions of *human will* toward love of God and love of neighbor.

It's not complicated or hard to understand. We grow to know God every time we make a choice that carries us down the way of love. The way of truth, the way of reality, the way of life.

Because Jesus has shown us that even death is nothing to fear, we can live, fearlessly facing whatever reality has to show us: and knowing that God is with us at every turn.

Amen.

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/10/health/coronavirus-plague-pandemic-history.html>