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AMDG

Epiphany 6A - February 12, 2017

Today we continue Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, the core of his teaching. This passage deals with importance of the Mosaic Law, which is the second Incarnation of God.

I've spoken to you before of the three incarnations of God. God's first incarnation was in Creation - when he imbued the material world with God's Spirit through Christ. God's second incarnation was in the gift of the Law to the people through Moses; God's third incarnation, of course, is in Jesus Christ, in which God's love was made manifest in a human being, someone we could relate to.

Today's readings, taken together, give us a deeper understanding of God's purpose in becoming manifest to us in Creation, in the Law, and in Jesus Christ. God's purpose, simply put, is to include us in God's life. God's intention, from before time, has been to make us partakers in the Divine Nature. Each manifestation of God has built upon the previous one, and draws us deeper and deeper into the God life.

This God-life, is based in Love - all aspects of the Divine Life are rooted in God's very nature which is Love. Therefore, anything incompatible with Love is not of God and contrary to God's intention for us. So, all of God's manifestations should bring us deeper into the life of God, which is Love.

The Hebrew Scripture reading today from Deuteronomy, is part of Moses' concluding sermon on the Law, in which he exhorts the people to embrace the Torah, or Godly way of life, which the Mosaic Law serves to create. Like God's other incarnations, the Law is a Gift. Those 613 commandments, decrees and ordinances were given by God to enable us to create the space for Life in God - for sustaining an intimate relationship with God, for building and sustaining a prosperous and loving community, for building and sustaining loving individual relationships, and for drawing others into the God life.

And the paragraph before today's passage we hear every year on St. Andrew's Day, "Surely the instruction which I enjoin upon you this day

is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach...It is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart.” And, the piece we heard today is read by Jews every year on Yom Kippur. These very important passages directly and unequivocally reconnect God’s beloved with the choices they must face in remaining true to God and the God life, and they reinforce how deep they are imbedded in our lives. We can choose God and the God life or we can choose not. The choice is always ours. And, the consequences are clear as well - choosing God, means choosing life and blessing; choosing not to live in God means choosing death and adversity. Very clear.

But, how do we know we are living the God life, how do we know we are using the gift of the Law correctly. Well, that’s where Jesus comes in. Jesus, following in the tradition of the prophets and rabbis before him, showed his followers, and shows us, the challenges of the Law. We can think we’re living in the Law, when we actually are not. That’s what Jesus begins to open our minds to in this passage. Blind adherence to precepts, dictates, and commandments may not only be insufficient, but can also lead us away from God. Like all great teachers before him, Jesus, took Torah seriously, though not always literally. He was no fundamentalist, which is what put him at such odds with Pharisees and Scribes. As we see in Matthew today, as well as in other passages in the Gospel, Jesus read and interpreted scripture in a spiritual and highly selective way. He regularly ignored passages that were exclusionary, punitive, and arrogant in favor of passages that were inclusive, merciful, and humble. In doing this Jesus gave us a wider lens with which to apply the Law. He reminded us that Love is the underlying principal of the Law, because Love is our direct channel to God and how God is incarnate in Creations. Later in Matthew he does the opposite of what he does in today’s passage. Rather than pushing us to dig deeper to find the Love within the Law, he pulls us back and encourages us to look at the Law in its totality, to see the Love which it manifests. “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” We read this every Sunday at the beginning of the 8am Rite I service. I wish we read

it at all services. Jesus reminded his followers and, us to not just follow the Law, but to **live** the Law, to actually embody the Law in our lives. However, like those Jesus was addressing, rather than using the Law as an embodiment of God's love, we can too quickly turn the Law into a cudgel, using it to destroy community, rather than create and sustain it; using it to destroy relationships rather than nurture them, idolizing the law, rather than worshipping and honoring the source of the Law which is God. And, without God we really are nothing. Without God our best efforts are debased. Justice becomes legalism; faith becomes ideology; charity become duty. Every virtue, if it is not permeated and informed by God's Love, eventually degenerates into vice.

Jesus used a basic rule of thumb in his application of the Law and in his interpretation of Scripture - Love. Whatever builds, promotes, and sustains God's Love in the world is a continued manifestation of God. Whatever does the opposite is not of God. Words and actions, however legal or well-intentioned, which are judgmental and self-righteous, which vilify and scapegoat entire groups of people, which break apart families, which deny basic human rights, are certainly not based in God's Law of Love, they are not actions which choose life. They are blasphemous acts and should be opposed by those who endeavor to live in God's Love.

And you all know the love I'm talking about; it's not the ooshy-gushy See's Candy love that we'll be celebrating this week, or the easy love of those we like, or the bring in your neighbor's trash barrel love. It's the Love in the Law and the Prophets, the Love Jesus taught and embodied. It's the forgive your enemy love; the welcoming of a stranger love; the foot-washing, hungry-feeding, prisoner-releasing, leper-embracing love that defined Jesus' life, and defined God's love for us. It defines what God expects of us, if we are to be partakers in the Divine Nature.

My brothers and sisters, the sermon given by Moses in Deuteronomy, and the sermon given by Jesus could not have been a very easy to hear. They are no easier now than they were then. But, I know that it is not perfection that God requires of me. God already knows my challenges and limitations. Regardless of what the psalm may say, it is impossible for me to be blameless and never do any wrong. What is required of me, and of all of us, is that we engage humbly and honestly and earnestly in

the regular choosing of God; the day to day, hour by hour; minute by minute choices we make which engage us in the God life, and bring us closer and closer to being Christ in the world. So, I enjoin us all to choose God - live the God life by humbly, honestly, and earnestly examining your words and actions - you notice I said **your** words and actions, not the words and actions of others - and asking yourself often, "Are my words and actions embodying God's Love in the world?"