Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost All Saints Church

Proper 17 September 2, 2018 Year B

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 James 1:17-27

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

Dear Lord, may we abide upon your holy hill?

About ten years ago, I had the great privilege of spending a week with Palden Gyatso, a Tibetan monk, in his mid 70’s who had been imprisoned for 40 years because of his protest against the Chinese invasion and subsequent occupation of Tibet.

He escaped into Nepal with two nuns who were his translators, and now he was traveling with them in the US. They were advocating for *Students for Free Tibet*, and also witnessing to the UN about crimes against humanity.

Palden and the two nuns were my guests for a week in my religion classes.

My students (me as well) were full of questions. The conversation I remember most vividly was when one of my students asked how Palden had endured the torture; how did he keep hope; how did he continue his protest under such pain? His answer:

“I knew I was in prison because of my Karma. I was reaping the consequences of evil deeds I had committed in another life.”

“You really believe that?” “That you somehow deserved your imprisonment?” “That doesn’t make sense?” How can that be?”

Especially, as we saw before us this gentle, serene, centered, prayerful man, monk, dressed in red robes and fragile wire-framed glasses who was the epitome of peace, love and reconciliation.

“How can you believe that?”

Palden responded immediately. “I don’t *believe* in Karma; I ***know*** Karma as fact; it is the truth of our reality.” He then went on to describe how he found courage in this knowledge- stability, explanations, and patience in the reality of Karma. It allowed him to live by his heart.

At the end of the week, I asked Palden to autograph his memoir, *Autobiography of a Tibetan Monk.* He spent fifteen-twenty minutes writing me a letter in his native script. I asked the nuns to translate it for me.

The letter was blessing me, blessing my family, my students, my work, my future, my hope. He was blessing you, as well. He told me that the blessing was just naming what was already there, and what would be and that he was privileged to have crossed my path of beauty.

We were a universe apart. As a Christian, I don’t believe in reincarnation, the reality of karma as the significant direction/shaper in life, nor Palden’s non-theistic view of the universe, ***and yet*** we shared one major understanding about life.

We were both committed to living a ***religious*** life. We had surrendered to our beliefs, that were not just “Ideas” but rather Truth wrapped in Mystery and Letting Go and Love and Doing the Right Thing. And in that surrender, we had found purpose, meaning and value.

We were willing to have our lives shaped, even bound, ***not*** *by human laws*, ***not*** *by a secular way of being*, but rather by **being rooted in the laws of religion**, frankly no matter how inconvenient they may be.

Our Scripture Readings this morning all emphasize this idea: The Law of God holds out the promise of an invaluable fruit of obedience, wisdom, and insight.

The issue is ***how do you follow the Law of God?***  The Pharisees, who are often portrayed as the bad guys, are actually working very hard to incorporate religious beliefs into everyday living. The Pharisees just got lost in their zeal and lost the significance of “the why” in the act of prayer. You wash your hands with the intent to pray for the life that was just taken in order that you may continue to live. Washing your hands ritually was much like why we say grace before we eat. To pause, to take a moment to be aware of our gifts and blessings. To remember God.

I love the ritual of saying grace before a meal. Often people ask me, when gathered at a meal to be the one to say grace. And I love it. Yet, I remember one occasion when the host lightly touched my sleeve, and said, “do you mind, if I give the grace tonight?”

“By all means!” And then this man prayed for all of us as we gathered, to enjoy the precious moment of living. What was significant was his younger brother was at the table, and we all knew he was dying of cancer and had maybe six months to live.

I don’t remember the words of the Grace, but I still remember how I felt- life was connected, love mattered, that this evening was a gift to be held, just as we held each other’s hands. At the Amen, we all looked up and all of us had tears in our eyes. Six months later at the brother’s funeral, we all referenced the Grace that we had shared at that meal. It was sustaining us in our grief. Why? Because we had all been touched by the hand of God. And we knew it.

Jesus’ point is not to shame the Pharisees, but rather to invite them into an eye-opening awareness of God’s sustaining and enduring presence. If you honor this presence with your lips, but not in your heart, then you’ve lost the opportunity to feel and know you are being held by God.

In other words, blind obedience is a dead end. A finger-wagging religious sensibility loses the heart. All of a sudden, rituals that are designed to point to God become man-made traditions that forget that life is a gift, rooted in justice, empowered by our commitment to be doers of God’s truth, to be inclusive, loving, patient, and discerning.

A ritual’s primary purpose is to help us to remember God. It’s so easy to forget.

I remember having an intense conversation with the Rev. Dr. Gideon Khabela, whom I have shared with you was a great mentor for me. We were in South Africa and Gideon was talking about the power of confession. That one of his greatest sins had come because he was worried about the cleanliness of a small make-shift church in a rural village: Tin corrugated roof, simple sidings for walls, a dirt floor.

Every morning, he went to this church and cleaned it…food had been left, dirty blankets, trash not picked up. Every day, he cleaned, and every day as the minister he admonished his people for not keeping the church clean. One morning, beside himself, he tore the church down in his frustration. It had been easy to break down, so make-shift at its core.

This will be a good lesson for everyone!

And as the villagers came, the weeping and wailing began. This had been their place of solace when their child died too early or a place of celebration for a wedding, or a place of reconciliation between family members torn by misunderstandings, or a place of song, or a place of protection and shelter in a storm- sometimes from a literal storm.

“Of all the mistakes I’ve made in my career,” said Gideon, “this was the worse. I couldn’t undo it. We rebuilt the church, but it wasn’t the same. The parishioners lost their trust in me. I learned then that religion has to with the heart and the heart’s ‘cleanness,’ not the external ‘uncleanness.’ My preoccupation of being a good minister blinded me. I had not addressed the matters of the heart. I never made that mistake again.”

Jesus is not ignoring or dismissing our religious traditions. Rather he is trying to open our eyes so that we can claim our deep-seated desire that God has given us, to long for God in all that we do. And to remember God.

And this recognition comes to us through our everyday living. When we ask ourselves, “What would Jesus do?” we shouldn’t be doing this to be “religious,” but rather obedient to God’s ways in our lives in order to discover something new about ourselves, our neighbors, our faith, our integrity, our passions, that we would never otherwise have known. This is the seat of wisdom; this is the heart of living the beauty of eyes-wide-open to the glory of God’s presence.

AMEN