

Sermon – Epiphany 7 – Christ Church Garden City

Matthew 5 : 38 – 48

One of my favorite artists is Mark Rothko, the Russian American abstract expressionist. His body of work is mostly large format color block paintings. One of the reasons he's one of my favorite artists is because I have a deeply emotional experience when I stand in front of one of his paintings. It is a spiritual experience for me because it connects with my deepest emotions. Over the years I have bought a number of books depicting his paintings. There is a world of difference between looking at a photograph of a painting and standing before one in a gallery. Rothko said of his paintings "a painting is not a picture of an experience, it is the experience." The experience is to stand before his work and feel embraced by it. The ineffable moment is quite profound.

We might have a similar experience standing before Jesus, feeling fully embraced by him, because he is the living portrait of God. We are the living portrait of Jesus Christ and the portrait of the heart of God. As a community of faith we have to be the living portrait of Jesus because this is how God is working out God's kingdom on earth.

We have to be seen and experienced as a community that is filled with people who think of others first. Each person is sister or brother to the other and acts out of love. We hopefully are able to be gracious, forgiving, loving, hospitable and generous because we are the children of God who showers us with abundant grace. We are to be for our community the real face and heart of Jesus and not just some facsimile. Our community should have the same experience of the ineffable, that we have when we experience God, when they come into our presence, and into the church.

Many people in our community though only experience Christians or church in superficial ways. Their experience might emanate from childhood when they were dragged to church services or from weddings, funerals and baptisms. Their experience might be as a parent bringing their children to your day care center. Some experience the church as failing them or society, and draw their experience from the many scandals the church endures or the wrongs done to them or someone they know. My brother-in-law explained to me once why he's skeptical of faith. Firstly the chaplain at his boarding school would never answer his questions about faith and religion and told him just to believe. Secondly he sees the world's conflicts as emanating from religion. He is yet to be able to overcome his skepticism and he's not alone.

In order for us to be the true portrait of Jesus we must deepen our spiritual lives and experience of God. The three passages of scripture set for us today are a beautiful roadmap illustrating the arc of our human experience of God. First, God's law as told to Moses is unpacked and filled out in the reading from Leviticus. Second, Paul provides the Corinthian community an illustration of Jesus as the foundation of the temple of God. Finally Jesus teaches his disciples the transition that they are to make from the legalism of the pure Law to a new ethic that is in sharp contrast to natural human values. Superficial observance of the Law was to give way to a radical search for the will of God.

The Hebrew Bible passage is the only time in our three-year lectionary cycle that we have a reading from Leviticus. We often don't hear it as the seventh Sunday in Epiphany is not often reached. Yet this passage is rich in nature and lays the roots of the summary of the Law that Jesus draws upon for his second great commandment "You shall love your neighbor as

yourself.” The Leviticus commentary is doing essentially the same thing that Jesus is doing in his teaching to the disciples. It is filling out the Law, as received in the Decalogue, for the community of God’s people as they sought to establish themselves in the Promised Land. There is significant interpretation found here and it flows through time to inform Jesus and his community, and now flows through to us this morning.

The social ethic found in the priestly telling of the moral law extends the horizon of responsibility beyond the covenant people to the poor and the alien. God insists that their social responsibility stretches as far as can be imagined. In v34 of this Chapter of Leviticus, God says “You shall love the alien as yourself.” We should all remember this as we experience and react to the current political response to refugees and undocumented immigrants.

Another key part of this passage relates to our life with God and with one another as the practical experience of our holiness. As we grow closer to God, we better embody and radiate God’s love, becoming the holy people of God. Keeping God, through Christ, in view in our lives is the key to becoming holy. It is a journey, not a destination.

The Epistle reading from Corinthians illustrates Jesus as the foundation of the temple of God. This foundation was laid down for us also so we can build our lives and our communities founded on his truth and commandments. Anyone who has any experience of building knows that without a solid foundation the rest of the building is weak and vulnerable to failure. It is the same for us. “Christ is made the sure foundation, Christ the head and cornerstone” goes the first line of one of my favorite hymns. We are weak and susceptible without Jesus.

Our journey closer to God requires of us to confront uncomfortable truths. Today’s Gospel passage teaches us something that to many is painful. The pattern of Jesus teaching continues to reach back to the Law with the phrase “You have heard it said,” and then reinterprets it for his community with “but I say to you.” Jesus teaching does not come out of thin air rather it is grounded in the conventional wisdom of the Law, something that the disciples are quite familiar with. Thus Jesus provides the context before he expands their understanding with his new interpretation.

The law of retaliation is the first wisdom Jesus interprets. The Law essentially permitted justice to be extracted from a perpetrator in equal measure. You slap me and I will slap you. You kill my son and I will kill yours. I feel our laws of capital punishment have grown out of this concept. There is a level of power given to the victim, or the community on behalf of the victim, to extract revenge.

Jesus though teaches us to depower adversarial situations by refusing to play their game. By turning the other cheek, giving up your cloak as well as your coat, or walking a second mile, we are moving from something forced to something chosen. We are moving to non-adversarial defiance. It takes real courage and faith to resist retaliation and choose to depower a situation without resorting to violence. Because Jesus is our sure foundation we are able to do this.

These actions should not be misunderstood as passive acquiescence to violence. A victim of domestic violence should not just stay in the relationship and accept the wounds. Jesus’ teaching helps us to discontinue arrangements that allow or enable perpetrators to wreak havoc. Jesus encourages us not to fight fire with fire, but to fight fire with water, de-escalating and depowering the incendiary work of retaliation.

As members of a community within a community we seek to model Christ in the world but as I have pointed out over these last few weeks it is hard to stand against the prevailing culture. It is hard to maintain the vitality of community that constantly has to work at being the image of Christ in the world. But that we must do.

One of the ways we can do this is through our friendships with each other. Friendships Aristotle said are “the bonds of social communities.” Within our church community, friendships are the way we sustain each other on our journey of life, deeper into the heart of God.

The third pillar of the book I’ve been referencing this past few weeks called *Resident Aliens* reinforces this truth. Friendships the authors say are not accidental to church life rather they are an outward expression of love for one another. Love your neighbor as yourself. Of course friendships are not exclusively for us in our faith communities. Friendships outside of our faith community can be wonderful witness to our faith in God and our being the heart of Jesus Christ.

In fact a healthy church living into the holiness of God is able to express itself through welcome, love and friendship, and through living Christ-centered ethics both inwardly in our faith community and outwardly in the community at large. We are able to do this because of the constant spiritual reflections we do and our journey with God in Christ. We are able to do this by living as the portrait of God in our world, being the light that shines into the dark places and being a guide for the lost.

As this season of Epiphany draws to a close and we start to orientate ourselves toward the season of Lent and Easter we might reflect on ourselves and our community as portraits of Jesus, the living God in the world. What do people see, and how do they feel, when they experience us? Will they see us as the perfect portrait of Jesus?