

Pentecost 3A “The Purposes of our Hearts”

1st Corinthians 4:1-5
Matthew 6:24-34

What are readings for a Sunday in Epiphany doing at the beginning of Pentecost Season? This is your trivial, esoteric, liturgical question for this Sunday. The beginning of an answer is that the church hasn't picked a fixed date for Easter Day. Since Easter Season and Lent both have a fixed length, whatever is next out in the progression of the church year must expand or contract to make up for the movement of Easter Day and its satellite seasons of Lent and Easter. When Easter Day comes late, Epiphany has more Sundays and Pentecost fewer. When it comes early, as it did this year, Pentecost has more Sundays and Epiphany fewer. In order to cover the same scripture readings, the readings not used in the shorter season are used in the longer. Since Epiphany was shorter this year, some Epiphany readings show up at the beginning of Pentecost.

It used to be, in the 1928 version of The Book of Common Prayer, that adjustments were made by moving lessons from Epiphany to the end of Pentecost Season. That used to be where the flex time was. So this is what's going on with the readings and just provides you with a bit of practical information on how the church calendar works.

Now, about the lessons. I begin with a statement from Paul. He says, “Do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.”

Think about disclosing the purposes of the heart. Paul has dressed his ideas in the mythic language of the second coming and final judgment, but I ask concerning what's underneath this language.

Who we really are is determined by the purposes of our hearts. That's where identity comes from. Because that's where identity comes from, it is the purposes of the hearts that determine the core realities of our relationships, especially our relation with God. Paul then goes on to say that every person will receive his or her commendation from God. He receives his commendation only when the purposes of the heart, which were private, become public or known. There is a boundary crossing here, from inner to outer, from private to public.

For the most part, in this, our ordinary world, our relationship with God depends on what I would call private inwardness. There is a sense in which the relation with God, which each of us had and has, (we can't help it) arises out of this private inwardness. The relation isn't accessible to outside examination. If I do not know the context from which you come – and that's a hard thing to know about another – what you have had to deal with to become what you are, I'm no fit judge. In fact, I'm hardly fit to understand. Even after years of therapy it's a bold therapist who will claim to **know** his or her client. (I can vouch that even after 28 years of marriage it's a bold person who claims to know his or her spouse.) The other person always retain the capacity to act in unexpected ways. (Sometimes you wish they would.)

So there's something important about the fact that identity arises from the purposes of the heart. It arises in private, and in this world of ordinary experience, never becomes more than quasi-public. We are required to proclaim and practice our love in relation to that which we do not fully know.

Now let's move to the gospel and all this business about not being anxious. I'd point to something usually missed in interpreting this passage: there are places in it indicating that because God gives you food, clothing and knows that you need doesn't mean awful things won't happen. After all, I would say, consider the grass of the field – even though Solomon wasn't arrayed as one of these . . . BUT . . . today it's alive and, tomorrow it is thrown into the oven. It's this being thrown into the oven which is in the text, but frequently ignored in the interpretation. Today God clothes the grass, gloriously; tomorrow the glory dies. The glory of the lily disappears in a day – even though the glory was a divine gift.

One could legitimately ask, if the grass is going to be burned in the oven, why does God make it, while it is alive, more glorious than Solomon? One response (I don't dare call it an answer) is related to a wonderful story I read in the Talmud. It says whenever a human being walks down the street there is an invisible angel which proceeds him or her. Have you heard this story? No? OK. This invisible angel is constantly crying out "Make way for the image of God." "Make way for the image of God."

"Make way for the image of God." Even though we all are going to die. Even though the Ash Wednesday ash on our foreheads is a symbolic reflection of a mite of the ash of and in our lives. The facetious part of me, which finds it impossible to take with complete seriousness even very serious subjects, wants to say, well, if death was good enough for Jesus what does a Christian have to complain about?

For a Christian, that flippant comment has a point. It's the same point we find in this passage from the Sermon on the Mount. There is a spiral in the spiritual lives of human beings which tends to draw us into an idolatrous understanding of our own lives and the world around us. It works something like this. When I start to get anxious about things, one result is to try to control, or if I don't try to control, to give up relating, or develop difficulty in relating because I can't control. And yet, here we are in a world in which there is much I cannot control. These fundamental things of life I cannot control: the years of my life, the resiliency of my body, my neighbors, the myriad chances that make the difference between life and death, success and failure, love and hate, hope and despair. The lilies of the field, they get clothed, more gloriously than Solomon, and then (snap of fingers) they die. It's easy to gradually come to center our search for meaning on our search for the necessities of life. It's easy to see who we are in terms of control of the means of life. It hard to seek meaning, and positive meaning, in what we cannot control.

This gospel passage is a warning that to focus our search for meaning on the search for the necessities of life mean the abandonment of a purposeful heart relating to God. A purposeful heart relating to God is what it means not to be an idolater. If there is no relation with God, on

the level of the purposeful heart, then the relation with God is, well, frivolous, it lacks stability. First one is here, then over here, then over there, then behind me. One pays attention to family, then to profession, or to the general community, or to church (as distinct from God), then to self-fulfillment, then to education, hobbies or maintaining appearances. Somewhere, in all this movement around, there is a relation with God for ten minutes a day, or an hour and a half a week or whatever it is. In this spiral, God becomes one thing we relate to among others, rather than the foundation of all relating.

Christianity cannot be, will not be satisfied with less than our calling into the worship of a God, into a relationship with a God, who is the foundation for all other relating we experience. Our relation with God needs to be the foundation for the seeking of the necessities of life. We seek the necessities of life to maintain our lives in good working order so that we are effective in honoring the image of God about which that angel is crying before us in the street. (And not just our own image of course, but that of everyone else.) We don't do it simply because we need these things in and of themselves. The objective of life is not mere existence, it is so the purposes of our hearts may be disposed toward God.

So all this business about lilies of the field, what we eat and where it comes from, the birds of the air, clothing and all that is saying: priorities! Without a fundamental relationship with God, our relationships with the things of this world become meaningless. It's not that God promises even what we need to maintain life. To believe so is to corrupt religion into a *quid pro quo* bargaining tool. Obviously, many people don't receive it, some of them good Christians, all of them loved by God. But this lesson is a warning, a caution, that without placing our relation with what we need to maintain life within the framework of our relation to God, within that inner disposition of the heart to God, then these things assume a life of their own and begin, first intruding on our relation with God and, finally, fracturing and displacing it.

One way to state the objective of the Christian life is: It is to take human life, which is usually frivolous, in the sense in which I used the word earlier, and knit it together so that it is, in all its glorious variety, from birth to death and beyond, related to or seeking relationship with, that one stable foundational reality we call God. It is not, you see, that we have to know right from wrong or do the right thing, because I, at least, would argue that sometimes that's out of our reach. We don't know what we should do and there is no way we can be sure. Any course can run ill. Our ignorance leads us into evil. Life long the Christian trains not to do evil; life long we continue to do it and repent.

But, there is always a way to relate what we do do, whether it is right or whether it is wrong, whether it works or whether it doesn't, to God through the inner intentions of our hearts and their directing and reshaping. For a Christian, it is that relating which is at the root of all meaning. We do not need to succeed, only to offer what we are to God. And the Christian life is to so cultivate the inner intention of the heart that it folds the ordinary as well as extraordinary aspects of daily life into a relation with God. That is the purpose of Christian living.

OK. That's enough on that. Please stand for the creed.