



TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Proper 17

3 September 2006

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

James 1:17-27

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

I have this really terrible personality quirk: I like to shock people. Not sure why—just one of my many perversities. More often than not, when people meet me and hear I'm a pastor, they apologize for not being "religious." Almost always I flash a wicked grin and say, "Hey, cool. I'm not either!" They never know what to say. "You're joking, right? How can you not be religious? You're a priest for chrissake. Oops, sorry reverend." I love it; I get 'em every time.

But I do mean it. I'm not religious. Nor need any of you be. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about the end and death of religion. Father Robert Farrar Capon, an Episcopal priest, tells us that "religion . . . is the human race's age-long preoccupation with the notion that there is something we can or should do to set ourselves right with God, or to get God to be nice, or to make the universe go more smoothly." Indeed. There is, we think, something we can do to keep God off our backs. But how do we figure out what that "something" is? Religionists tell us we must read the Bible—or as someone in all seriousness has called it, "God's little rule book." Ish! Makes me want to puke.

Many people have observed that the most pressing problem within the Church today is how to read the Bible. However, it's always been a problem. This business of how to read and interpret Scripture was at the core of much of Martin Luther's preaching and teaching. With that in mind, let's work with our readings for this morning, readings that seem completely preoccupied with rules. In the first reading we hear from Moses that all the commandments of Torah, of which the Ten Commandments are only a tiny few, are to be kept in their entirety. "Guess what?" says Luther. "Moses and the Law of Moses have nothing to do with us." All those rules, says Luther, they get us absolutely nowhere with God. Oh yes, we need rules to keep from killing each other, and every place in every time and land needs to figure those rules out. And the business of the state then is to enforce those rules. The business of the Church, however, is to help us know that we cannot get right with God via the rules; that because of who we are and because we live on planet shadowed over by evil we cannot escape, it is impossible to make ourselves good to God. Rather it is God who makes God's self right with us. And it gets even better: God comes to earth in Christ and says through the cross that there is nothing we can do, not even put God to death, that will force God to be angry and vengeful. Nothing. In return for our crucifixion of God we receive not punishment but new life—God says, I create in you a new heart, a heart that beats now to the tune of my unconditional love for you. So there.

So what becomes of all the rules in the Bible? With regard to the Epistle of James from which we heard this morning, Martin Luther would have gladly kept it out of Scripture; the thoroughly potty-mouthed, irreligious man that he was, Luther called the book of James all sorts of earthy things that I'll only repeat if you come to Catechism class on Wednesday evenings. James, to Luther, had hopelessly confused The Rules with The Gospel, The Gospel that says we can't get right with God via The Rules. If you're going to

read the Bible in a way that is true to Christ, you've got to make a distinction between The Rules and The Promise, between Law and Gospel, and to do that, you have to use your God-given brains to read the various books of Scripture each in the context of their own time and culture.

In Deuteronomy, the source of our first reading, when church and state were one, we have rules that really were God's gracious gift to the people of that time and place; those rules were incredibly progressive in the pursuit of well-being and a truly just social order. But they were for a particular time, people, and place—as are all the rules in scripture that keep chaos at bay, that work to keep life sane and just. None of the rules, from beginning to end of Scripture, has much to do with us in our time and place. The state, in every time and every place, has the duty to figure out how best to provide rules for the good of everybody.

But the rules also have another function, says Luther. The rules about loving God with all the heart, mind, and soul and the neighbor as the self—those rules especially should function like a mirror. They show us that rather than loving God and the neighbor, we are, all of us, infinitely turned in on ourselves. The rules about loving God and the neighbor, when properly taught, show us that the human heart is concerned with making the self god, with making one's self the ruler of the universe. No set of rules, no matter how well followed is going to change us from being turned-in-on-ourselves, is going to change us from wanting to shove God right off the throne and take over. Washing pots, pans, and hands—especially in the food service industry—is good public health law, but it's not going to do anything to change the heart. We humans have the innate capacity to call ourselves lovers of humanity, to give to charity, to work for the poor, to care for the widow and orphan and still deep inside, thoroughly despise and wish off the planet some of the people who surround us. Ask me. I'm really good at it. And God may be number one for a few minutes when we're in church, but get out the door and suddenly money, power, prestige, and privilege, all for ourselves, once again become our ultimate concern. The rules about loving God and neighbor, when properly taught, should show us that. But the Promise has nothing to do with following even the rules about loving God and the neighbor. The Gospel, the Promise, that's unconditional—and it is precisely for those who know deep down inside that they are truly turned in on self.

The Promise, the Gospel, is for those of us, who know, deep down inside that we are people who honor God with our lips but not with our lives. The Promise of God's unconditional love and forgiveness is for those of us who know that in our hearts we make other people into objects to be used. The Promise for those of us who lust after fast gas-guzzling cars, expensive clothes, and luxurious vacations, and who can rationalize away the fact that these things come at great cost to the planet and to someone, somewhere. The Promise is for those people who in their hearts have come to know that to be a citizen of the United States in this age is to have obscene privileges at the expense of not only the rest of the world but at the expense of some of our fellow citizens and their forebears. The Promise is for those who know they are a part of systemic evils, many of which they are, by and large, powerless to overcome.

Furthermore, Martin Luther reminds us, The Promise is the only thing that gives Scripture its authority, and those things in Scripture which do not point us to the Promise may be safely ignored. Ignore the rules? Egads! What then becomes of our behavior? What's to keep us from killing each other? It's the State's job to keep us humans in line; it's the State's job to lock us up for life when we kill.

And the Church's job? It's the Church's job to announce the end of religion, to proclaim that the god of revenge is dead, dead, dead. It's the Church's job to proclaim: Your God rules from the cross and proclaims to all humanity, “I will not take revenge upon you, my murderers, rather I will turn my cheek and forgive you all. And I am not be found among the religious, but among the unclean and cast-out, among the thieves and prostitutes. And upon the cross with me, your old self is being put to death and with me in the resurrection, your new self arises.”

Sisters and brothers: You have been united with Christ in death, and you are now united with Christ in resurrection. And now in this new life, you have the heart of Christ beating within you. Now there are no longer any rules to follow, only a resurrected life to lead, loving the neighbor as the self—the new self,

the self of Christ, the self who loves to death and thereby lives forever. And that's not religion: it's the Promise. So go now you irreligious lot: you are Christ for the world.