

Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

October 26, 2008

Lessons: Psalm 1; Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

This morning is the last Sunday in October, which means that we are drawing very close to end of the season of Pentecost. After only four more weeks we will move into the season of Advent, and a whole new year will begin in the life of the Church.

Remember, Pentecost is the season of the Church year where we take a very serious look at how we are actually living out our lives as Christians. Pentecost is the time when we hear lessons that remind us of what our desired pattern of living is, and we hold our own lives up next to the pattern to see how we are doing. This morning's readings offer a very good opportunity to look at the road we have travelled during these last few months, and they also offer us some good reminders for us of how we are to go forward on our spiritual journeys.

Let's begin with the foundation that is laid down for us in Psalm 1, which we just read together. And as we hear these words again, let's ask ourselves how they compare to the foundation of our lives. We read:

*"Happy are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked, \* nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the seats of the scornful!"*

*"Their delight is in the law of the Lord,\* and they meditate on his law day and night."*

Does that sound pretty much like us? Does that pretty much reflect how we are choosing to live our lives each day?

In Leviticus we are reminded that the Israelites were given a great number of directions that they were expected to follow. And in our first lesson we heard just a few of them. As you listened to God's words to Moses, did anything stand out for you? We heard:

*"The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy. You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people...You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."*

Several pretty clear directions to Moses on how to live a holy life. How are we doing with these directions? As we look at how we are living out lives a Christians today, do

any of these instructions stand out? Are any of them providing a little challenge for us in our lives?

In our Gospel today we heard Jesus offer what has become known as the Summary of the Law. We heard that the Pharisees had gathered around Jesus. And then that:

*“...one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘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.”*

Think about Jesus’ last words in his response: *“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”* These words summarize what we are being asked to do as we continue our journey along the road through Pentecost. Again today we are given specific directions as to how we are to live out our lives. And again the question comes up, how are we doing?

Two weeks ago, after being reminded that we are not to judge, we are not to condemn and we are to forgive, we wondered if it was possible that on occasion we might pick and choose which of the commandments we are going to obey. As you thought about that over the following several days, did anything stand out or come to mind? And if something did come to mind, were you, as so frequently happens, just a bit tempted to explain why it was ‘ok’?

For just a moment, let’s assume that we have been listening and paying attention to what has been presented to us as guidelines for living our lives. In fact, imagine that you can hear God’s voice calling your name and very clearly reminding you of each of these guidelines. You acknowledge that you are aware of them and that you are committed to keeping them. And so you step out onto the pathway of your life. What do you think is going to happen? Well, quite probably a situation or a person is going to present you an opportunity, an opportunity to either follow through on your plan to practice what you know to be right, or an opportunity to pick and choose whether to do things our way or God’s way

Today let me offer something that I believe can help us as we continue to look at how we really do live out our lives. It is a word. It is a small word that if we become conscious of it just might make a big difference in our lives. Ironically, two different writers addressed this word this week, one on the 19<sup>th</sup> and the other on the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup>. One writer, British theologian and Bible translator J. B. Phillips, wrote:

*“When we were at school, we were told that the conjunction ‘but’ is used to introduce a contrasting idea. A sentence can go merrily enough, and a ‘but’ comes in, and a different idea appears.”*

Has that ever happened to us? Has that little word “but” impacted our desired plans, our words and actions? When we know very clearly what we have read and heard, how often does that little word seem to make it alright to do the opposite? Do we perhaps say something like: *“I know what it says, and I know what I am supposed to do, but in this particular case it’s ok to not do it.” Or “I know I should not say this, but...*

On Monday of this week the writer in the Forward Day By Day offered us additional food for thought. The lesson that day was from Luke and addresses two instances of how people respond to the call of Jesus. We read in Luke:

*“Jesus said to another man, ‘Follow me.’ **But** the man replied, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’*

*“Still another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; **but** first let me go back and say good-bye to my family.’ Jesus replied, ‘No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God’”* The Forward Day By Day author then wrote:

*“‘But’ is a little word that makes a big difference. It’s a word we use when someone asks us to do something and we want to refuse...(for instance) (‘I’d love to help, but I have to go out that day.’) or (we want to) postpone our involvement (‘I’d love to help, but you’ll have to wait till I finish my exams’) or even chicken out altogether (‘I’d love to help, but you know I’m no good at organizing’).*

*“In this Gospel reading, Jesus invites two people to follow him. Neither of them says an outright ‘no’ to Jesus, but both responses have an explicit or implicit ‘but’ in them. For each of those men, there is another priority that takes precedence over following Jesus.*

*“In contrast, consider Jesus. When he knew that the time was drawing near for his death, Jesus did not say ‘but.’ He did not make excuses, he did not seek to evade the cross, he did not try to postpone that dreaded day. Instead, quietly, without fuss and fanfare, ‘he set his face to go to Jerusalem’ (Luke 9:51)*

*“To follow Jesus it is not enough simply to say ‘yes.’ Our ‘yes’ must be an unconditional, unqualified yes—no ‘buts’ entertained.”*

This week let’s each think about our lives. Let’s each think about the person, the Christian, that we are called to be. And then, let’s try to become very aware of how many times that the little word “but” tries to lead us into being less than our ideal selves. Let’s see how many times we can say “no” to that little word “but”.

AMEN