

Sermon by The Rev. Betsy Johns Roadman, 5/29/05
St. Augustine's Church, Croton-on-Hudson, New York
Texts: Deuteronomy 11:18-21; 26-28; Romans 3:21-25a, 28; Matthew 7:21-27

Those who put together the lectionary – the schedule of Scripture readings that are included in each principle worship service of the church – deliberately chose passages from the Bible that would complement each other, that would share a common thread or theme. Looking at the passages that are appointed for today makes me wonder whether those in charge were either asleep at the wheel or making sure that we aren't. The passages seem to outright contradict each other.

The Old Testament reading, from the Book of Deuteronomy, is to be understood as the words of Moses in a portion of an address to the people of Israel as they embark upon their new life in the land of Canaan, following a long sojourn in the wilderness. Moses reiterates and interprets the law that was given at Mt. Sinai years before so that the people will know how to maintain their identity as the chosen people of God in a new place and context. And then the people are urged to take that law so very seriously that the commandments are burned into their hearts and souls, and taught to their children at all times, so that they might be obeyed. And with obedience to these commandments comes blessing; with disobedience, comes curse.

That couldn't be clearer, could it? So, the application for us, as followers of God in our land and in our context, might be that, like the people of Israel, we have a choice to make. Our best choice, as was theirs, is to know, teach, and obey the law of God, because with that choice comes God's blessing.

But, it seems that what Deuteronomy is saying is in opposition to the words of Paul in the passage from Romans. Paul, in his letter to the church in Rome, explains his understanding of the good news of God in Jesus Christ. And what he claims in this section is that "a person is justified" (or, made right with God) "by faith, apart from works prescribed by the law." Because no one has been able to keep the commandments of God perfectly, says Paul, God sent Jesus to be an atoning sacrifice, clothing sinners with the very righteousness of God; making them right with God because of their faith.

That couldn't be clearer, could it? And so, what we might understand from this text is that, as was the case with the earliest followers of Jesus, we, in our own context, cannot actually keep the law. If we recognize that reality, and receive the grace of God as God's gift through our faith alone, then we are reconciled with God. That reconciliation comes about by grace, through faith; not by the works of the law.

What do we do with this seeming contradiction between the passage from Deuteronomy and the one from Romans? Some would say that because of the New Covenant established through Christ, we're no longer bound by the commandments; that the words of Scripture in the New Testament carry more weight with us, as followers of Jesus, than do those of the Old Testament.

If that's so, then the text from today's reading from Matthew must carry the most weight of all. It's one of the four Gospels, after all, full of stories about and teachings of Jesus himself. This particular passage is the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. As Matthew records it, Jesus has spoken at great length to the disciples about what it means to live a life that's pleasing to God. And what he's said is that it absolutely does matter what we do. We're to be generous, merciful, and forgiving. We're to live humbly and modestly. We're to work for peace, justice, and equality. Like Moses, Jesus interprets the law for a new time and place. And like Moses, Jesus puts forth a choice for those who have heard his teaching. Acting on Jesus' words will establish a foundation on which to build a life of significance and substance. Ignoring Jesus' words will lead to a life built on a foundation that will not hold.

It looks like it's now two against one. The texts from Deuteronomy and Matthew seem to maintain that obedience to the law is critical to relationship with God. According to the text from Romans, faith is what's important, apart from the works of the law. How do we understand all of this? How do these different texts inform each other?

It seems to me that the same truth is at the core of all of these texts; each is just emphasizing a different facet of that truth. The truth is that we can't keep the commandments of God. We can't live perfectly. And even if we could, we would certainly use what we had done right and well to prove ourselves to God, to justify ourselves in God's eyes, and to compare ourselves with other people. It's just what we do. It's our nature to gather our good works together in a nicely wrapped package and present that package to God, saying, "Lord, Lord – I spent Wednesday morning teaching a Bible class at Sing Sing, and Wednesday afternoon visiting patients at the hospital, and much of Friday counseling a family in crisis. I've done really good work; better than what many are doing; surely I deserve your blessing and your favor."

The truth is that each one of us is loved completely and unconditionally by God simply because God is who God is. There is absolutely nothing that we can do that will increase God's love for us. There is absolutely nothing that we can do that will decrease God's love for us. And we receive that truth through faith.

When that reality starts to sink in and to become part of us, we find that the only appropriate response is to then live a life of gratitude, humility, thanksgiving, generosity, and service. When that reality sinks in and becomes part of us, we almost can't help living a life that looks more and more like Jesus' every day.

Almost. It's not automatic, and we do have choices to make – every day, every hour – about how we live. Those choices aren't about positioning ourselves so that we will be accepted by God. They're about intentionally building a life that's founded on what's of real importance and of lasting value, both in response to the love of God and in response to the wisdom of God, as revealed through the commandments and Jesus' teaching. Many of the best choices that we can make run completely contrary to what our culture claims is important for a life of

value and significance, which is why our constant vigilance about those choices is so crucial.

These lectionary passages from Scripture - from three different ancient times, in three different contexts – actually don't contradict each other at all. Together, they offer us some choices. Will we receive with gratitude, through faith, the complete and unconditional love of God? Will we open our hearts to the ways through which ongoing relationship with God will certainly change us? Will we act on the wisdom of God so that every single day, we're intentionally building a life of enduring significance, substance, and service? It's our choice. Amen.