

“What I Do”

Psalms 145:8-14; Romans 7:15-25;
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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This is the weekend when we celebrate the 4th of July, the founding of our nation. As we think about the founding of a nation, I realize that there is another founding I need to think about – the founding of my own faith and what it's founded upon – just as we think about that when we think about the founding of our nation.

One element of that founding, and the association with the date, is the Declaration of Independence, adopted in 1776. Wanting to be on our own, to no longer be under the auspices of the king, the colonies declared independence. Sometimes I wonder, since we were founded on a desire for independence, whether we haven't continued to take that independence further and deeper into our lives. Perhaps, as with anything, too much of a good thing can sometimes cause problems. I wonder if, in our independence, we want independence from everything – from other people and perhaps even from God.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus was talking about how the children in the marketplace were never happy because nobody joined them in one thing or the other, and how first John came and then Jesus came with two different ways, and yet the message was still ignored. I wonder if part of the reason it was ignored is because we just don't want to hear the message, that there is a desire not to have dependence on anything beyond ourselves. We want to be so independent, to do things all on our own. I wonder if that isn't part of the issue Jesus is bringing up. We want so much to be on our own, to be able to do it ourselves, that we want independence even from God. We want to think that there is nothing that we have to pay attention to, to shape our lives in relationship to.

Paul may be talking about the same kind of thing when he suggests that the problem with the law is that it just shows me how I don't live up, how I struggle to do good. We think about some of the Ten Commandments: do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not covet. How hard it is not to do some of those things. Perhaps we can put murder as one thing we do not do, but as we go down the list, bearing false witness and coveting are pretty simple for us to do. Simply acting out a prejudice can be a form of bearing false witness. Indeed, Jesus calls us instead to love our neighbors as ourselves, and yet we find that even that is hard to do when we often have so much desire to be loved ourselves. It's hard sometimes hard to love others first.

Paul sees that even the law – the instructions God has given to help us do life in a way that engages the lifegiving nature of God's will – also points out our flaws and failures. Paul recognizes that he has to struggle with those flaws and failures. I have always loved this passage from Romans because in it Paul is like any of us, recognizing the struggle to do what is good and finding that we do not do the very thing we want to do. He says, “I can will what is right, but not do it. I can will to accomplish the beautiful

but do not do it.” He goes on to suggest that something, he calls sin dwells within him. I would like to think about what it means to have something that dwells within us.

I would suggest that as we grow up, all of us have things that begin to shape us. We have instilled in us attitudes and habits and ideas that we don’t even realize begin to become part of who we are. They are just part of our family, our community, our nation, our culture. We have ways of thinking and behaving that hardly make it into our consciousness. Though sometimes when we go somewhere else we notice some of these habits, attitudes and ideas..

I am reminded of travelling to England and recognizing that I ate differently than the people who are there. We tend to use a fork in our right hands, and they use it in their left hands. My daughter once went on a date with somebody who was talking about how uncouth it was for people to eat using their fork in their right hand. Now, I think that whether you use the fork in your right hand or your left hand doesn’t really matter. It’s not much of an issue; it’s just a habit. It becomes an issue when that habit begins to be judged by an attitude that suggests that somebody who doesn’t do it my way is uncouth.

What other kinds of pernicious ways of doing things seep into our lives because we learned them over the years by the way we’ve been enculturated, the ways we have learned from our families, from our communities, from our society? Some things just seem normal to us. What happens when it feels normal to be prejudiced? We begin to see the way a pernicious attitude and habit and idea can become part of who we are, instilled in us, dwelling in us.

I think there are some things that we learn and become part of who we are that are good. We learn, perhaps, to care for others. We learn to be polite. We learn what goodness means. There are other things, like eating with a fork in one hand or the other, that just seem neutral and don’t really matter. But it does seem there are some things where a difference becomes a division. Eating with a fork becomes a dividing line on whether somebody is uncouth or not. We can begin to allow covetousness and animosity toward others based on skin color, status, or tribe, be defined for us so that we end up dehumanizing, devaluing, and degrading others simply because we’ve learned to do that. We’ve learned a “them,” an “other.” When we find ourselves reacting out of these habitual ways of doing things as Paul notes, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” He sees that as sin which dwells within him. I’m suggesting that one-way sin dwells within us is the way behaviors, habits, attitudes, and understandings get instilled in our lives, perhaps without us even recognizing it.

Another little example is when I was growing up, I always heard my mother’s phrases. When something went wrong, a little frustration, it would be “fiddlesticks” or “jimony Christmas.” Or, if someone was upset, she would say that person was “fit to be tied.” The more I think about that, the more I wonder, is anybody ever fit to be tied? A little phrase that seeps into my way of thinking, perhaps, because I heard it over and over and over again. My mother was a person who wanted to be a good Christian. She didn’t think of that phrase as teaching something bad. And yet, I wonder.

Jesus, at the end of the first part of this reading, can't quite get through to them because when John came, they said he had a demon because he was not eating and drinking, but called Jesus a glutton because he was eating and drinking. He suggests that there is something called wisdom. Wisdom, he says, is justified by her deeds. I just wonder if wisdom isn't seeing beyond our habitual reactions, beyond our feelings of defensiveness, to be able to see the way to love even one's enemies. He says wisdom is justified, that is, is shown in our relationships by its deeds. So how we can look beyond comes out in our behaviors.

Sometimes I get to the point of thinking if I imbibed all this stuff and it's just part of who I am, how am I ever going to change? I think that's where Paul is at. How am I ever going to change if I do the very things I do not want to do? Paul says towards the end of the Romans passage we read, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Because we do have a place to turn. We do have a way to change. We do have one that will lead us and walk with us through that change. In fact, he goes on to talk about how Jesus leads us to walk according to the Spirit.

So, we do have a way. We do have one to turn to, who will show us. If we look at our behaviors, , our habits, our attitudes, our ways of thinking, we may find that perhaps this way of thinking, this way of acting, this idea has some problems compared to what Jesus is calling us to do, asking us to be.

Towards the very end, Jesus says, "Come to me and you will find rest for your souls." He talks about a way to work through life together, to be yoked. He talks about a yoke that fits, that is useful, that is easy. Not that there is no burden, but the burden is useful. The burden is light. It's manageable.

The problem is we often can learn things that can cause more problems than are helpful. Jesus is inviting us to know a different way, to allow him to be our Lord. As he invites us to the table, it's so we can receive sustenance, community, and grace. I'll tell you what. Having places where I truly gain sustenance, where I find community, where I know grace give me rest and enable me to go on the journey, to do the work, to carry the burdens.

So these passages are an invitation to follow Jesus, to begin to have that wisdom that he gives us in being able to see beyond some of what is instilled in us, some of the sin that dwells with us, and begin to change our very lives. Or we can just do what the world shapes us to do, which I think often ends up causing more problems and can be life-destroying rather than life-giving.

I have to watch what the instilled attitudes, ideas, and habits I have are. I can allow them to shape me, and lead me, and guide me, or I can follow Jesus. In fact, we can let those instilled attitudes ideas and habits shape who Jesus is. We can let the world shape who Jesus is, or we can let Jesus shape us. I think there's a big difference and I think it shows in what we do. May Jesus shape us. Amen.