

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (b)
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9 James 1:17-27 Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
August 29, 2021 (Saturday and Outdoor Services)

“You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God.” Moses is preaching to the Israelites, who are about to cross the Jordan river and go back into the promised land. Telling them: “when you go into the land, don’t forget the God who saved you from slavery in Egypt, who has provided for you every step of the way through the wilderness, and who has chosen you to be his people for the sake of the whole world.” And the part about not adding to what God has said and done, or subtracting from it, struck me, because of something I’ve noticed lately in my own life.

I always say prayers in the morning when I get up. And in the last year and a half, with all that’s happened in the world, I’ve noticed my prayers have changed. Before covid happened, my prayers had become very long. I was on this kick of adding more and more to them, almost every day. I’d pray about each individual task I had to take care of that day, each person I was going to meet with, things coming up that I was worried or excited about. I would go down the list of things that were happening at St. John’s. The list of people who were ill or facing special challenges. I prayed for each person in my family, individually. So my prayers were getting long and detailed, to hit all the bases. And then later in the day, if I realized I had forgotten something, I would make sure to get in a quick word. Because you know, if I don’t remind God of some detail he should be attending to, sometimes things don’t turn out like they should.

Prayer is always good, of course. But I think part of what I was doing with those long prayers was hoping that God would build a wall of protection around me in the sense of “God, please make sure that all these little things in my life stay firmly under my control. God, make sure that everything turns out just the way I want it.” God loves it when we bring the smallest things to him in prayer. But you see how in our deepest inner conversations with God, that spirit of fear can enter in, and even our prayers become more about us controlling things than they are about giving everything to God. That helps us understand what Moses is talking about when he says “don’t *add* to what God has said and done.” It’s when we’re not really confident God is going to take care of the universe the way we want him to—in a way that’s advantageous to us in the short-term—that’s when we’re tempted to start adding to what God has said and done.

And that’s what Jesus is frustrated with in the gospel lesson. The pharisees—the religious leaders of the day—keep adding on to what God says. It’s not that Jesus doesn’t like clean hands and good hygiene. The rules themselves are not really the problem. It’s that the leaders were demeaning God’s character—they were making God look small—by telling people, you save yourself and gain status for yourself in God’s eyes by following the rules. Jesus is reminding us all...you can’t save yourself. You can’t maintain your status in front of God. It’s out of the human heart that all evil intentions, fornication, theft, murder, adultery...and all the rest...all of that destructive behavior comes out of us because we are broken at the deepest level. No law, no rule, no matter how well we follow it, is going to fix us. Our twisted hearts are the problem. And just as a side note—I feel compelled to say this—people often say our relationship with God is a matter of what’s in our hearts, not so much a matter of the little things we do. Jesus is saying

the opposite here: our hearts are the problem. Our good intentions, our feelings of love and affection towards others—these cannot save us. He's not saying as long as our hearts are OK, we're OK. He's saying that it doesn't matter what we do, because we are sick to death in our heart of hearts. He's saying nothing in me can save me! Only God can save us—the God of the Exodus, the God of Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead for us. All we can do is trust that God has performed a spiritual transplant, that he has given his heart for ours. Faith is all we can have. It's enough! So Jesus is frustrated with the religious leaders because they keep adding on to what God says.

The opposite—taking away from what God says—well, we see that all the time in our modern world. It's basically to ignore God, forget God, deny God, act like he's not there. Even in the churches we see some of that, when we ignore certain things from scripture that we don't like to hear. We selectively emphasize the things that build us up, and we basically delete the passages we don't like. That's what Moses means when he warns, "don't subtract from God's word." Either way, when we subtract or add, aren't we putting ourselves in God's position? And don't we end in the same place? Fighting our own human battles from a place of human fear and human weakness? We become like the sneetches in the Dr. Seuss story. Truly a story for 2021. You can see how quickly every little aspect of life turns into a political battle between the star-belly sneetches vs. the plain-belly sneetches. That's what happens when we put ourselves in God's place, adding or subtracting from what he has said and done for us. What's left without our Savior God, who loves us and who shows us the way, who stands in the middle of it all and gives us his grace and forgiveness? What's left is sneetches, climbing on top of each other trying to get to some illusory position at the top of the heap.

Well, over the last year and a half, my prayers have changed. They're much shorter. As in, "Lord Jesus Christ...*save me*. Lord Jesus, forgive me. Lord Jesus Christ, save my life. Save me from this world of death. Heal me. Save me from the sin and evil and fear that have a hold on me. God, take my life into your hands. Take my family. Take my congregation. This is all yours, completely. I'm a dying mess without you. I'm nothing without you. Without you, I will make a mess of everything. Save me!" That's the gist of it. In short, while I can't say I've enjoyed it, I can say God has chased me out from behind all those walls of control I was trying to build, and into his arms. I can no longer add nor subtract anything from what he has done for me. Praise God.

It's like, however we might feel about what's been happening in the last year, with the pandemic, all the divisions and ugly stuff we've been seeing in our country, families splitting apart over political issues...all the frustration and anger; as believers, in the middle of all this, we have the word of God. Last week, we heard Jesus asking us, just like he asked the twelve disciples: "are you also going to go away from me?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." I think that right here in 2021, you and I are being forced into the hands of the living God. Who are we going to listen to in a time like this? Who has the words of eternal life? Who are we going to respect? Praise God! The world as it is has made the answer so clear. I cannot think of a time in my life, when the false gods have shown their hand so blatantly as right now. Christians are back to asking the basic questions. Who do we serve? Are we going to serve God, or human beings? Are we going to take our cue from the witness of holy scripture, or from a committee? Are we going to recommit to making God

known to our children and our children's children here at St. John's? In times like these, our "yes" just gets louder. Because the beauty of Jesus Christ—the true King who gave his life for us—only shines more brightly in the middle of all this. As dark and confusing as the world appears right now, we can be sure that none of this is going to turn out well for the devil.

God gives us the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can live totally engaged with the world, but not trapped in the world's games. How beautiful it is, that you and I can gather around his name here today. Free from the games. Free to answer all the world's conflict with lives of worship, witness, loving service and praise. To God alone be all the glory.