

Readings for Sunday, December 4th, 2016 – Second Sunday of Advent

This is the second week in a row that we have come across a reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. In today's reading it seems as if Paul is addressing an apparent issue in regards to the differing religious observances around diet and holy days. The recurring tensions that were created between Jewish and gentile converts to the Christian movement by such differences in daily religious routines constitute a running theme through the New Testament. Paul's fundamental appeal is to accept, to take to oneself and into one's own community, the person of contrasting, even opposite, religious practices; his desire is to break the cycle of mutual condemnation that regularly resulted from religious zeal when it is lacking in trust or faith. A person's standing, which was linked so closely to one's religious standing in the community, is determined by God to whom each belongs.

Romans 14: 4-13

⁴Do you have any business crossing people off the guest list or interfering with God's welcome? If there are corrections to be made or manners to be learned, God can handle that without your help.

⁵Or, say, one person thinks that some days should be set aside as holy and another thinks that each day is pretty much like any other. There are good reasons either way. So, each person is free to follow the convictions of conscience.

⁶What's important in all this is that if you keep a holy day, keep it for *God's* sake; if you eat meat, eat it to the glory of God and thank God for prime rib; if you're a vegetarian, eat vegetables to the glory of God and thank God for broccoli. ⁷None of us are permitted to insist on our own way in these matters. ⁸It's *God* we are answerable to—all the way from life to death and everything in between—not each other. ⁹That's why Jesus lived and died and then lived again: so that he could be our Master across the entire range of life and death, and free us from the petty tyrannies of each other.

¹⁰So where does that leave you when you criticize a brother? And where does that leave you when you condescend to a sister? I'd say it leaves you looking pretty silly—or worse. Eventually, we're all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. Your critical and condescending ways aren't going to improve your position there one bit. ¹¹Read it for yourself in Scripture:

"As I live and breathe," God says,
"every knee will bow before me;
Every tongue will tell the honest truth
that I and only I am God."

¹²So tend to your knitting. You've got your hands full just taking care of your own life before God.

¹³Forget about deciding what's right for each other. Here's what you need to be concerned about: that you don't get in the way of someone else, making life more difficult than it already is.

The author of Matthew was an unknown Jewish Christian of the second generation writing around 90C.E. in or near Antioch, Syria. The distance with which Matthew speaks of the Jewish community, using words such as "their synagogues," suggests that the Christian group he was addressing was no longer a part of the Jewish community. The reading this morning follows the story of John the Baptist. Like the other Gospels, the ministry of Jesus is preceded by the ministry of John the Baptist. Matthew follows Mark, but with two important modifications. First, Matthew refrains from saying that John offers baptism for the forgiveness of sins; this is something that Matthew reserves for Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. Second, in Matthew, John's preaching of repentance is addressed not to the crowds but to the Pharisees and Sadducees. In this way the preaching becomes a warning to Judaism of Matthew's day. The people who have attended the synagogue have refused to flee from the wrath of God by responding to the gospel.

Matthew 3: 1-12

¹While Jesus was living in the Galilean hills, John, called "the Baptizer," was preaching in the desert country of Judea. ²His message was simple and austere, like his desert surroundings: "Change your life. God's kingdom is here."

³John and his message were authorized by Isaiah's prophecy:

Thunder in the desert!

Prepare for God's arrival!

Make the road smooth and straight!

⁴John dressed in a camel-hair habit tied at the waist by a leather strap. He lived on a diet of locusts and wild field honey. ⁵People poured out of Jerusalem, Judea, and the Jordanian countryside to hear and see him in action. ⁶There at the Jordan River those who came to confess their sins were baptized into a changed life.

⁷When John realized that a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up for a baptismal experience because it was becoming the popular thing to do, he exploded: "Brood of snakes! What do you think you're doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? ⁸It's your life that must change, not your skin! ⁹And don't think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as father. Being a descendant of Abraham is neither here nor there. Descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen. ¹⁰What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it's deadwood, it goes on the fire.

¹¹"I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. The real action comes next: The main character in this drama—compared to him I'm a mere stagehand—will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you

from the inside out. ¹²He's going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He'll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he'll put out with the trash to be burned."

Sermon - Do We Truly Search For God?

I thought I would start this morning by asking one of those questions that we already know the answer to; how many people here this morning have ended up looking for something that they were sure they knew where it was, only to find out that the object was not where they thought it was.

This then sent us on a quest to find the object. Basically what I'm asking is; have you ever lost something and had to go looking for it?

Throughout this week I have really been considering this question and I have come to realize that we live in a culture that is very much based on the idea that we are looking for something. If we take a look at movies we can find many examples of movies based on the idea of looking for something. We can talk about movies such as Eat, Pray, Love where Julia Roberts spends a year looking for love and meaning in her life, to the Indiana Jones movies where Harrison Ford spends the entire movie looking for relics. We have the 1960s television show and subsequent movie The Fugitive where the main character is looking for the one armed man to clear his name; to The Sound of Music where Julie Andrews is looking for her place in the world. It seems that this theme of looking for something, whether it be within the individual, or in the world, is quite a dominant theme in society. I am sure that each one of you can come up with your own examples of movies or TV shows where the theme of looking for something is dominant.

As I considered this theme of "looking for something" I realized that in many ways this mirrors the world today.

It seems as if many people today spend their life looking for something or searching for something. It could be that they are looking for or searching for meaning in their life, they could be looking for someone to understand them, they could be searching for someone to just listen, or they could just be searching for someone to care. It seems like many, many people are searching for something.

This advent we are using the resource "Follow the Star" and each week there is a theme that comes with the resource. Last week we looked at hope and this week we come to the theme of search. I suppose that this is a very appropriate theme considering that one of the ways that we looked at the theme last week was by considering the travellers from the east. The Wiseman, who came from the east, were truly searching for something. They had recognized that star in the sky as a sign of something important that was about to happen and so with their hearts and minds filled with hope they set out to find, to search out, this important thing that was to happen. To do this they chose to leave behind all that they have known and journey into the unknown. All along their journey they continued to enter into the idea that this search, for this sign or event, was important. And so they searched.

So by now you may be wondering what this theme has to do with our Scripture readings this morning. The Gospel of Matthew that we read this morning speaks to the ministry of John the Baptist, where he begins to baptize people in the River Jordan. From the reading this morning we hear that people poured out of the city to come and hear John preach, to confess their sins, and to be baptized by him in the river. I wonder if these people we're searching for something in their own lives. Their religious lives have been based around the temple and all of the practices that being a member of the temple entailed, and yet they are coming to listen to a man who appeared out of the wilderness, who may have looked a little crazy to some people, and yet come they did. The reading goes on to say that John realizes that many of the Pharisees and Sadducees are also coming and John calls them out. The reading from Matthew verse seven says, "When John realized that a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up for a baptismal experience because it was becoming the popular thing to do, he exploded" and so I wonder if maybe the Pharisees and the Sadducees were also searching for something. They were searching for a sense of belonging with all of those other people who were being baptized by John? Or maybe they were searching for information with which to stop John?

I wonder what this theme of searching means to us in the world today. We live in a world that tells us that if we are looking for something, the world has the answers; if we want to have meaning in our lives, all we need to do is to buy some new items to make us feel better. If we are searching for a connection with others, all we need to do is to join an Internet app or go to the local clubs and we can find that connection. It seems that the answer to all of our searching can be found out in the secular world, can be alleviated if we just buy into what the world tells us is important. And yet, there are times that this world has not answer to our searching.

I wonder as Christians if we truly believe this or if there is another way. The reading this morning from Matthew quotes a passage from Isaiah, I will use the NRSV version, "the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord." This particular passage from Isaiah has been translated exactly as I just spoke it but it has also been translated another way, which completely changes the meaning and might have some bearing on our theme today, "the voice of one crying out: in the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord." It is a small change in translation that can make all the difference and how we understand this passage. If we recognize the possibility of the second interpretation then we understand that when we ourselves find ourselves searching for that which cannot be found, when we are in those wilderness places in our lives we are called, even then, to prepare a way for the Lord. Those times in our lives when we seem to be searching for that which cannot be found, like that object we missed placed that we spoke about at the beginning, it is during these times that we need to really search of God.

Tell the story of Mary and O'Shea – as told by John Ortberg

As people of faith we are challenged to prepare the way of the Lord when we ourselves find that we are in the wilderness of our lives. Just as the wise men entered the unknown in search of the tiny baby, we are challenged when we find ourselves in the search of meaning, in search of who we are to not be afraid of those wilderness places and know that God is with us through it all. We prepare a way for the Lord in our hearts in our minds and our souls. What are you

searching for this Advent? Where are your wilderness places? Will you prepare away of the Lord? Amen.