

Pentecost 15B: Proper 17  
 September 2, 2018  
 Rev Ken Wratten at St Luke's  
 Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9  
 James 1:17-27  
 Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

My wife Ruth and I are rules people. We laugh about it, but it's true. The rules say to use turn signals, and so I remain to this day a member of the small minority in California who still signal when I make a turn or change lanes. It's a rule. Ruth and I meticulously separate the trash from the recycling. We have had debates about whether Styrofoam packing material is recyclable. We have called the trash company before to make sure we got it right. We were told it is not recyclable. It's a rule. But what is the motive of all this attention to turn signals and recycling? Not getting caught! But the meaning of a "Rule" is something that provides a means of measure. Rule of the Order of St Benedict, or of the Franciscans, or the Rule of Life of Brother Lawrence; these were about measuring their journey to the heart of God; taking account of their openness to God.

The Scripture lessons today tell about our need to put our religious rules in the right place in our lives, so that what we look for is not a perfect report card on the rules, but that the rules we follow help us move toward the full conversion of our hearts for God. That is the goal of having a Rule of Life.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus challenged the Pharisees to consider where their heart was. He didn't care whether his disciples followed the ritual purity codes for washing their hands. He challenged the Pharisees, "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition." Jesus doesn't want people's hearts focused on rules devised by humans; he wants people's hearts always listening for the heartbeat of God within them. The motivation for actions, for decision making, needs to be opening our heart to God, and learning the heart of God.

The challenge Jesus lays on us is to constantly conduct our own heart-check. We need to remember that the health of our heart-for-God is a choice. Jesus lists all sorts of evils that we have the free will to choose. But he warns that those choices defile us; they damage our relationship with God.

How much of our life in the central coast, how much of the tradition we live by at work, at home, at church (lots of tradition at church), reflects the heart of God? How has your own spirituality grown in your life? Are there changes in you because you have intentionally learned more about the heart of God?

James – the brother of Jesus - gives us 4 steps to take for learning the heart of God. Verse 1:21 says to “welcome the implanted word that has the power to save your souls”. That ‘implanted word’ is God’s Word in the Bible, and God’s Word written in our hearts.

James 1:25, ‘look into the perfect law, the law of liberty.’ The Greek word here for ‘look’ means to ‘carefully investigate.’ That’s why we have Journeys and Bible Studies throughout the year; they get us into carefully investigating God’s word.

James 1:25 says that as we study God’s Word, we need to persevere. So we need to not just read God’s Word, but reflect on it, discuss it, and let it sink into our hearts. We make available copies of Forward Day-by-Day; and in our Bible Study, I ask that everybody have a good study Bible. Another tool is to use sticky notes for a favorite – or a troublesome – passage. These are ways to get into the context, and the deeper meaning of God’s Word, so we can persevere in learning about the heart of God.

James 1:25 says as we study and persevere, we need to not forget.” As we persevere in our study of God’s Word, we will begin to remember more and more of it.

The message from James and from Jesus is to live our life with the heart of God beating in us. Tradition is important to us Episcopalians; as we mirror the worship practices of the little house churches of the first century, and the decorum of the third century church when it took on the look of the Roman empire. And while our tradition forms a ‘home base’ for us, our life as Christians is not supposed to be about a rules driven religion, but about love driven worship. (repeat)

We are not called upon to only listen to the Word of God, but to study it. Persevere in finding its deeper meaning. Remember it. And respond to it as the Spirit leads us.

The real goal in our faith journey is not to check off a list of godly accomplishments, but to experience a conversion of our hearts. Listen for the heartbeat of God beating within you. Amen.