

ARE WE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

Lent 3, March 15, 2009, Grace Church

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Lent is the time for us to focus on our relationship with God. We have to face the fact that many of the things we think and do are not what God would have of us. We call ourselves Christians; we talk about being a Christian nation. But let's be honest, there is a huge gap between God's ways and ours! Today we are invited to look at the 10 Commandments, the Cross and even the way we worship and question whether we are doing something that will bring us closer to God, or deluding ourselves. Do we live our faith? Or are we Christians in name only.

I was reminded this week of a phrase that demonstrates what I am talking about. Many people believe this phrase is in the Bible, it isn't. What's more, many people live this phrase in their lives. Tell me, have you ever heard, "God helps them who help themselves"? See, it's familiar to us! But it is not a biblical or Christian teaching! Yet, so many of us make this phrase like scripture! Do you know the author of this phrase? No? He is also very familiar to us ... he lived across the Delaware River in Philadelphia, and his name was Ben Franklin! Franklin spent most of his life as a "deist", someone who believed in God, but was not necessarily Christian. This phrase isn't the teaching of Jesus. If we live it, we are lively falsely.

What was the great teaching of Jesus? What did he say was the way for us? You can take either of two common teachings, the one from Matthew's Gospel who says we are to love god and love others as ourselves (The Summary of the Law). The other comes from the Gospel of John and Jesus' great commandment, that we love one another as we have been loved. If we are serious about living into a relationship with God, then we have to focus on God and others to enter most deeply into the way of God!

In my reading this past week, Dr. William Willimon noted that we Americans are perhaps the most "professionally" developed Christian nation in the world. But he goes on to say that we are the least Christian in our behavior! 75% of Americans say they pray, but only 33% attend Church regularly. There is a wide gap in what we say and what we do ... this is not the Christian way.

Willimon goes on to say that is a good time for us to lay Holy Scripture alongside our lives ... and ask, "Are we living the Christina life?" I'm afraid on our part there is too much talk, and too little action. Jesus talks about caring for others, and yet we have the 2nd worst foreign aid record in the developed world (only Italy is worse). Jesus says feed the hungry, and yet 18% our children in this country live in poverty and more than half the world goes to bed hungry every night. When it comes to taking care of our children, we rank last among the rich and developed nations! It does not seem that we are living out our faith responsibly.

If we think about the 10 Commandments, one says do no murder. Yet, our murder rate in this country is 4 to 5 times greater than all of Europe! Another note, we are the only Western democracy that still has the death penalty. What does this say about our view of the sanctity of life and the desire to follow God's commandments?

Our growing personal debt and growing national debt does not demonstrate much love for others, but more love for self. We focus too much on what we want, often at the expense of those who truly are in need. The gap between God and us only grows.

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Our culture says that “it’s your money, use it for you!” The consequences of this have turned us into a nation of consumers and spenders. Those in need, even the Church, struggles to make ends meet. We are falling farther behind financially. The average giving in the Episcopal Church is two and a half percent, but only 1% at Grace Church. How does this speak about our relationship with God?

The reality is that our lives are not being modeled after Holy Scripture and the teachings of Jesus Christ. It’s time for us to take action and make some needed changes! It’s time to get mad ... not at the government, or politicians or the talk shows or the media, but at ourselves! We are not living the Christian life. We are not following Jesus. We are too preoccupied with church furniture, or landscaping, or the order of the service and not caring enough about living the Christian life! We are called as Christians to be people oriented, by showing care and compassion. We are called to worship, by putting God first in our lives!

What we see in Mark’s Gospel this morning is Jesus getting mad in the Temple, because the gap between God and people was growing, not shrinking! Each of the reading today speaks about the nature of relationship and how it defined and lived out. Let’s take a little time to look at each and lay it alongside our life.

Exodus describes for us the Ten Commandments, the law given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai. It describes the relationship of the Hebrews with God. There are two parts, the first four commandments talk about the people’s relationship with God. The other six talk about the peoples’ relationship with each other. They describe the essentials of the relationships that the early Israelites will live.

It use to be that we Christians knew these 10 commandments by heart. Now most of us are lucky if we can name 4 of the 10! These commandments are still important for us today. They begin to describe how we are to be in relationship with God and each other. However, too many of us think of the 10 Commandments as 10 suggestions! If we wish to draw closer to God, here is a good place for us to begin!

Paul talks in Corinthians about the cross. Jesus Christ shapes our relationship with God, by his sacrifice and death on the cross. The cross closes the gap between God and us! He goes on to describe how this is not understood by the world. The Jews want signs and the Greeks want wisdom. The truth is that no set of rules, any sign, and so knowledge will save us. The only thing that saves us is a relationship with God that is marked by faith and belief that the cross will save us.

We think that if we only know enough, if we only have the reassurance of signs, our relationship would be sure. Paul says that the sign of the cross is an anathema to the Jews (people dying on a cross were considered condemned). The cross provides no wisdom to the Greeks who felt the right knowledge could set them free of sin, suffering and death. It is only the Cross that brings us the relationship with God, and the salvation that we are seeking.

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Finally, today, we have the story of Jesus cleansing the Temple in Jerusalem. Lent is the time when we are commended to cleanse ourselves of false and corrupt practices. We are challenged to embrace a new form, or reformed, practice of worship. Remember that the Temple was the meeting place of the religious and political world of Israel. But what do you find when you get there for worship? You find the high prices at places to stay, and expensive (overpriced) food and animals for sacrifice. The rate of exchange is lousy and not in your favor.

I would remind us that it was the practice at the Temple to exchange the common coins for religious coins. Why was this done? Who's image was on the coins, Caesar's! This constituted an idol, and would be forbidden in the Temple. Moneychangers would exchange your coins for the right ones, for a price. The interest rate, the exchange rates benefited the changers not the people. The banking system was corrupt! Sound vaguely familiar today?

The reality was that people were being ripped off! The practices in the Temple moved people farther away from God, not closer! It's into this that Jesus comes. He views the scene with disgust, becomes angry, and springs into action! Jesus says that he will bring new worship, a new way into being and a new relationship with God, through him! This will happen through the Cross.

We have the opportunity to enter into a new relationship of God because of what Jesus Christ has done for us. Now is the time for us to change our lives and attitudes. No we have a model that brings us closer to God, by following the example of Jesus. It's about loving our neighbor as ourselves. It's about caring for the hungry, or sick or poor, or stranger. It's about being peacemakers and sharing with others. It's about our sacrifices that reflect the great sacrifice of Jesus.

What might we do in Lent to accomplish this? Stop listening to radio and television commentators. Read the Bible or attend another worship service instead. Stop thinking it's about "me" and reach out to others. Stop making excuses and complaining and start acting! If we want a relationship with God, now is the time to understand that Jesus has opened the way for us. The Cross is our guide. Now it's time for us to measure our lives against his ... and honestly ask ourselves what needs to change in us to come closer to what Jesus holds out.

So the question we have to ask ourselves today and answer is: Are we in relationship with God? If not, what will we do to move closer to God. Just a hint, the answer is Jesus!