

Sunday, February 28, 2016
All Saints Episcopal Church
San Leandro, California
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon

Followers of the Way

In the first part of today's Gospel lesson Jesus confronts a simplistic theology that says good things happen to good people and bad things to bad people. Jesus says, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did" And he continues in a very paralleled manner, "Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them--do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

Bad things just happen. The rain falls on the just and unjust alike. God is not in the business of punishment. Rather God is in the business of transformation. This is what Jesus means when he says, "Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did." Repentance is our English translation of the Greek word *metanoia*. It means change of mind and heart. It means stopping dead in your tracks and turning around 180 degrees.

So, here's a quick one-question quiz: **What was the phrase that earlier Christians used to describe themselves?** "Followers of the Way"

This hearkens for me to Jesus' words, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." The early Christians recognized that the faith was not just a compilation of ideas and doctrines, but a Way that is lived and followed. In fact, that Way the early Christians followed was radically different from the culture in which they lived.

Classism was shattered in the early church. Saint Paul writes in his letter to the Christians in Galatia, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." These early Christians shunned materialism and consumerism, recognizing that happiness cannot be derived from possessions and accumulation of 'things' and that we cannot ethically have abundance when there are brothers and sisters without. The Book of Acts attests, "They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need." They lived communally and the needs of all were provided for.

There were methods by which conflict was necessarily worked through, not left lingering and festering as is too common in our culture today. In the Gospel of Matthew, it was taught that, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church . . ." Indeed, they were not allowed to approach the altar if they harbored ill-will towards a brothers or sister in Christ.

Vengeance was shunned, whereas in our culture it is enshrined in a penal system of punishment

as opposed to reform. In his letter to the Romans, Paul writes, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink . . .’” Early Christians refused to resolve matters in court and most serious scholars of church history agree that for the first two to three centuries of the Church, Christians rejected not only emperor-worship, but also refused to participate in the military. They were ready to accept martyrdom before killing.

These early Christians were in many ways radicals, standing contrary to the culture in which they lived, a culture not very different from our own. One divided by classes, enslaved to materialism, where each had to pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps, conflicts were festering, and vengeance and violence was abundant. But not so among these early Christians. They were Followers of the Way.

While Jesus came to deliver us from sin and death, he did not teach his disciples comfortable ideas, but a radically different way of living on the face of this planet—indeed, a call to Kingdom Living. In his prayer he taught us: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” Our mission then is to live into the reality of this Kingdom, which Jesus says is among us, indeed, within us.

If we take this seriously, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” we must consider the ways of this earth and where the Kingdom brings reform, where the Way brings a new mode of being.

Homelessness. In the United States, 1 in 7 houses are vacant and 1 in 402 Americans are homeless. That’s 24 vacant homes per homeless person.

Hunger. In the United States, about 1/3 of the food supply at the retail and consumer levels goes uneaten and the U.S. spends about 1 billion dollars a year to dispose of food waste. Think of expiration dates, food left on plates, and restaurant waste.

Mental illness. Sixty percent of adults and almost one half of youth ages 8-15 with mental illness received no mental health services in the previous year, and it’s no surprise seventy percent of youth in juvenile systems have at least one mental health condition.

Wealth. In the Bay Area, income inequality—the gap between the rich and poor—is so pronounced it is actually on par with developing nations in Africa, such as Rwanda.

War. Since the launch of the war on Iraq, there have been over 126,000 documented civilian deaths from the violence of warfare.

The ways of our culture are broken. On the feast of Martin Luther King I shared this quote: “He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it.” This is why the early Christians called themselves Followers of the Way. They followed a different way, not just of ideas and beliefs, but a different way of life and protested and stood against the evils of their day.

Elsewhere in the gospels Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” He never endorsed physical violence, but uses this metaphor to illustrate that the Way he illumines is not a comfortable way; not for those seeking an easy absolution; or politically correct path. Indeed, the ways of the Kingdom put us at odds with the ways of this world. This is what Jesus means when he says, “For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.”

78% of US adults identify with some form of Christianity, but our Christian values have collapsed to a culture of individualism, greed, materialism, power, violence, and oppression. We have become complicit with the evils that perpetuate homelessness, hunger, lack of medical care for those in need, disparity of wealth, and violence.

To be Followers of the Way is not popular. To be Followers of the Way is not convenient, but it is the straight and narrow path of which Christ teaches and is, indeed, the Way of life. So, we must ask ourselves, in what ways have we become complicit with the ways of the world that stand in opposition to the Gospel? Like the early church model, do Christians today act or look any different from the mainstream culture? Following the metaphor Jesus uses in today's Gospel lesson of the fig tree, what might be done in our lives to nurture our growth that we might bear fruit in abundance?

If we are to seek reform, repentance, or *metanoia* (Greek for *change of mind and heart*), we might ask ourselves in what small ways we may be called to adjust our lives to turn towards The Way, the path of the Gospel. Following the Way means intentionality in all areas of our lives. It means seeking justice and Gospel values in all we do. For example, do we invest in socially responsible companies, or do our investments line the pockets of corporate greed? Does the clothing we wear or the coffee we drink come from ethical, fair trade production or fuel the slavery of global sweat shops? In what ways can we adjust our lives to align more fully with The Way? In what areas of our lives might we be called to repentance?

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