Confronted with these readings about doing good and not doing evil, I feel prompted to ask, “How do we tell the difference?” Oh, we get the big ones, like the difference between ISIS-K killing people indiscriminately and the Taliban violating human rights, especially those of women and children, versus global and local efforts to feed the hungry and clothe and shelter the poor. Piece of cake. We all get an A for telling the difference.

The problems arise when the differences are less clear-cut. We begin to quarrel internally and out loud about what freedom is, for example. And Janis Joplin, God love her, didn’t clear it up for us by singing it’s “just another word for nothin’ left to lose.” We’re having real, sometimes publicly silent, debates these days over what it means to be free. And freedom set against responsibility to and for each other.

Today’s gospel presents a specific incident concerning another big topic—righteousness or purity or worthiness. Some would frame it today as “who’s going to heaven and who’s not.” (That latter is a topic, by the way, that doesn’t cause me a great deal of angst, because I believe that’s God’s business and not mine. . . . Another topic for another sermon, perhaps.)

Anyway, today’s gospel. The Pharisees are at it again. This time they’re hammering Jesus about his not insisting that his disciples wash their hands before eating.

This is not about whether it’s a good idea to wash one’s hands or produce or utensils before preparing or eating a meal. I’m pretty sure, but these days it can be hard to tell, that we all agree that’s a good thing to do from the perspective of health and hygiene.

But we need to remember that this all happened before modern notions of health and hygiene; germ theory had not yet emerged.

The Pharisees’ objection was based on conformity to rules and rituals, not health and hygiene. Someone who followed all 613 commandments, or mitzvots, was undeniably pure—ritually and every other way. (The number 613 appeared in writings from the 3rd century, but the idea was the same, regardless of the precise number, at this earlier moment in history.)

I’ve talked about this before (and I can almost hear some of you saying, “yes, *ad nauseam*”), and I almost apologize for the repetition. Almost, because I think it bears repeating.

And now for a brief digression: When I talk about the 613 mitzvot in the Jewish Bible I am not describing the attitudes and practices of Jews today. As a matter of fact, I’m not characterizing the Jews at Jesus’ time. In the past I’ve been fairly comfortable saying that this business of earning salvation was something propounded by the corrupt leadership of the Jewish community in and around Jerusalem at that time, the same leaders who out of self-interest goaded the crowds into calling for Jesus’ crucifixion. *Now* I’m telling you that who did what to whom and when and how in this regard doesn’t interest me nearly so much as what Jesus had to say about this practice.

That’s what interests me, because that’s the same dynamic at work today and that has been at work in every moment of human history. We—we *humans*—apparently have a kind of basic instinct to reduce right and wrong to sticking to lists of behaviors. Sometimes the lists are enormous, and sometimes they extend even to thoughts as well as behaviors. But no matter how long the lists are, they are finite. Even if the last item on the list is *et cetera*. Because it’s the *et cetera* that gets us every time. It’s when we decide to draw sharp black lines around the blurry gray areas in which we so often live that we begin to oppress each other. (Again, another sermon, perhaps, for another time.)

End of digression.

In Deuteronomy Moses tells the people to heed the statutes and ordinances for one reason: to gain wisdom and discernment. He seems to be saying, “You need to discipline yourselves in these multitudinous commandments so you’ll be able to discern wisely how to deal with situations that fall outside of them.”

The psalmist sings beautifully about the nature of the commandments—to help the faithful be truthful and avoid evil, to be guileless and to support their neighbors, to be honest. Sounds a lot like Jesus. More about this in a minute.

James and Jesus both describe the spirit of the law with qualities we all recognize and uphold: generosity, mindfulness, forbearance. In speaking of meekness, James writes about the humility to welcome God’s word that “has the power to save [our] souls.” There it is! Really, the recognition that it’s not how well we follow arbitrary rules, but how humbly we allow God’s grace to work in us. Then, James says, we will be prompted to take action that benefits those around us, to be doers of the word and not judges over those who get tripped up on legal technicalities. That’s true religion, James, writes: to take care of the folks in the margins who cannot take care of themselves.

All of this, of course, is set against those who were in effect saying, or implying, that God isn’t a necessary part of the good/bad equation. It was about the statutes and ordinances themselves. In other words, given the right list of good-doing and bad-avoiding, a person could work out their own salvation without the help of other people or God for that matter.

Jesus, responding to the scorekeeping self-righteous (the “self” in that hyphenated term is *super* important) approach to faith and conduct, tells his followers: if you search your own heart, if you open yourselves to God’s transforming grace, you will be tending to the most precious gift you have received from God: your very life, your self, made in the image of God. If you open yourself in that way, searching out the compassion and empathy and love for others, you will avoid putting forth evil into the world, and the externals will take care of themselves.

When I was talking about the psalm I said “more about this—Jesus’ take on these virtues—in a minute.” Well here it is. I think that in today’s gospel, once again, and always, if we take care to look for it, there is evidence of the driving principle Jesus put forth when asked: Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself. Everything else—those hundreds of commandments come from these two and depend upon them.

+ + +