

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

3 Lent
March 19, 2006
Rev. Demery Bader-Saye

“Way to Live”

Because Lent is a good time for confession, I will say now that I can be a bit of a TV-Head. I am especially inclined to watch makeover shows, Extreme Home Makeover, Trading Spaces, Curb Appeal, 10 Years Younger, and one of my favorites, What Not to Wear. I'm sure my therapist would have a field day dissecting my pleasure, indeed fascination, with seeing the messy made clean, and the mundane made beautiful, gray hair turned caramel with honey highlights.

What Not to Wear is an hour long show in which two hosts; the elegant but sarcastic Stacy and her more gentle but still honest colleague Clinton ambush an unsuspecting, fashion-impaired person and, for the bribe of \$5,000 new wardrobe and a makeover, get that person to agree to come to NY and first be humbled, even humiliated, in front of a three way mirror. After trying to justify some outdated ensemble in front of the mirror, with Stacy pulling and tugging on extra fabric saying “What were you thinking?” And Clinton coming up with helpful metaphors such as “You look like my Grandmother’s sofa,” the person is dragged to a big garbage can where the offending garments are thrown away and a mannequin with spiffy new, stylish clothing is rolled out. It is time to learn the rules. No more wearing baggy clothes to hide the chub, this style looks good on you. Don't buy puce; it just isn't your color. And so on. Armed with a list of the rules, the person sets out to shop in New York City. By the time he or she has gotten a new hairstyle and had that unibrow tweezed, they almost always leave happy, feeling transformed and often ready for a new start in life.

At first glance, the story of today's scripture lessons could be titled *What Not to Do*. In the book of Exodus we see Moses, still sunburned from the rays of light shining off of God, with whom Moses has just spent many days. Moses has struggled down the mountain, twice, with these heavy stone tablets. Carved on the tablets is one of the cornerstones of our faith, the big 10.

Of course he catches his people in a humiliating three way mirror moment of their own, worshipping a golden statue of a cow, BIG NO NO! So says what not to do rule number one. You shall have no other gods before me. And the list continues. Do not make for yourself an idol or worship any idols. Do not make wrongful use of God's name. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Honor your father and mother. Do not steal. Do not kill. Do not commit adultery. Do not lie. Do not covet, that is do not wish you had your neighbor's, well, anything, do not covet, not his house, not his donkey, not his wife. In today's lesson from the gospel of John the actions of a righteously angry Jesus, in the very early days of his ministry, still gaunt from his forty days in the wilderness, this rough and tumble savior also makes the “what not to do” message very clear. Do not turn God's house into a place of abuse, misuse, manipulation or greedy profit. These scriptures lay down the law of God.

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But what we can't lose sight of is that these passages are more than just a laundry list of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. They are the foundation of an entire way of life rooted deeply in the attributes of the God who created us. They are about living as people of honesty, loyalty, reverence, discipline, self-control, and gratitude. These very clear boundaries set by the Lord are meant to give our lives structure and framework. These laws, carved in granite, are to be for us bedrock, the strong foundation for the shelter of our lives set firmly on that foundation not only faithfully, but freely and joyfully.

The law of God, the rules about what exactly to do and what not to do are not meant to bind us or imprison us, but to create for us a space of freedom where we accomplish all the rest of living. As the psalmist writes, "the law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul...the statutes of the Lord are just and rejoice the heart." Because Christianity is not only about the big 10, about the framework and foundation of the law, we can't stop there or we're really just left with a skeleton. Picture a body made only of bones, no we need flesh and blood, or a house with only a framework of 4x4's-no! We need walls and a roof and colorful paint and fabric and art. We don't ever want to reduce our understanding of what it means to be followers of Jesus to a simple list of rules and regulations.

That framework, that foundation of rules is a necessity, but it is only a beginning.

It was the same God who sent Moses down the mountain with a list of rules on stone tablets for the Israelites to follow who also gave the very same people a rich, wonderful land, flowing with milk and honey, and Sabbath celebrations full of light and blessing and food and drink, who kept the candles burning for eight days and on only a thimble full of oil on Hanukkah. And the same Jesus who turned over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple with a shout of dismay said these words not many days later, "I came that you may have life, and have it abundantly." (John 10:10) That same Jesus cried salty tears at the death of his friend, walked on the wavy water of the Sea of Galilee, healed the dappled skin of lepers, used his spit and some dirt to make a blind man see, feasted with cheating (and vertically challenged) tax collectors, did all types of miraculous things with fish, saved an adulterous woman from certain death, broke spongy bread and poured out fragrant wine on the night before he died, giving his body to be the bread that nourishes us and his blood to be the drink that quenches even the driest, thirstiest mouth.

Following Jesus is about all of life, about filling what can be dark, lonely, and difficult days with goodness and light, good things, good people, good practices. It is about finding a way to live abundantly.

In my journeys as a youth leader, I have come across a wonderful book called Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens. I want to share it with you in case you can find a way to use it as a congregation and/or even, individually, as families. It is an inspired book, written by youth and adults together. And I love it because of that, youth and adults in collaboration, listening to each other, talking to each other, dreaming together about a life in Christ. After more than fifteen years in ministry, I've come to understand that helping youth and adults to stay connected, to laugh and play and work together, to face difficult times together, is a big part of my calling as a priest. Youth and adults need each other; I

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firmly believe that youth cannot go it alone in this complicated world. They need to be validated and guided, sheltered and mentored, to be celebrated and accepted. And I just as firmly believe that adults need youth because youth have unique gifts to share that are vital to the life of the church and to me as a person who is growing older and more like my mother by the day. Youth bring to the table gifts of passion and emotion, deep insight and fierce loyalty and, best of all openness and willingness to try new things, think new thoughts. We need to be connected, one to another. And this book shows what that looks like.

In the first chapter, entitled *Life*, Dorothy Bass and John and Martha Schen write, “Take note: [this book] includes no chapters on what not to do. Teens hear plenty of don’ts these days: don’t drink, don’t cheat, don’t do drugs, and don’t have sex. We want to help you see the positive life that is open to you, not the prohibitions that assume you want to go in negative directions...Practicing life in the Holy Spirit certainly requires tough choices at times. It calls for the discipline of an athlete and the attentiveness of an artist. But it is not something you have to do to please someone else, not even to please God. Instead, this life is a gift you receive as you join hands with other people and walk with Jesus and his community toward the future God has promised, one step at a time.”

The book, which our new diocesan youth and adult council is reading together as were-imagine youth ministry in the Episcopal Church in Northeastern Pa, has 18 chapters, each one written by a youth and an adult together, all filled with ideas and stories and practices –ways of living that *when lived* over and again, day by day, week by week, transformed us into disciples of the crucified and risen Lord. The practices include seeing the story of our lives as reflected in the story of scripture, how to think about abuse, our bodies, our stuff, about food, how to protect and nurture creation, and creativity within ourselves, how to choose what will be our life’s work, the continuing importance of play, the mystery of time, the importance of truth, how to make disciple-like choices, the comfort and joy we find in friends, welcoming the stranger, taking the long journey of forgiveness, and becoming God’s prayer in the world. Each one is an invitation to abundant life. The authors of chapter one write, “...The chapter on eating and drinking does not criticize teens who drink alcohol, even though we believe that teens should not drink alcohol. Instead, that chapter invites you to share your food and your life around a table with your friends, your family and other people you don’t even yet know. The chapter on telling the truth does not include a lengthy condemnation of cheating, even though we know that cheating is wrong. Instead, it tries to show how satisfying a life with honesty and integrity can be, even when that way looks hard at first.”

The beauty of this kind of thinking is the grace that abounds within. Yes, we have a standard of living. We know what is right and what is wrong. God has made it very clear. But we also know that there is so much more to faith than a checklist. And this is good. This is good because we often fail, each and every one of us fails. We struggle, as Paul writes in the passage from Romans we read today, "doing the very things we hate" the things we know are wrong and do not want to do. And if that was the end of the story, if we were living by a mere checklist, then even one ‘wrong’ answer out of ten puts us on the edge of a b+ and forget it if you’re challenged in two or three areas, which I’d venture to say most of

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us are. When we seek to follow not a list carved on a stone cold tablet, but the Son of God who is alive and well and knows every sorrow, every heartache, every temptation we do, who saves us not because we are perfect, but because *he is perfect*. Then we can shout our thanks. Listen to Paul here, he gets it “Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me...wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord for showing us the way to live.

What a joy it is to be with you all today. I thank you for the invitation to come and see what your parish is up to. I've heard wonderful things about you all from Fr Bill and now I know them to be true myself. I rejoice in the ways that you are living the abundant life here and I will keep you in my prayers, that you may continue to flourish in the light and nurture of our awesome and eternal savior, Jesus Christ.

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