

## **Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost**

**August 29, 2021**

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Psalm 15; James I: 17-27.

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

### **Law vs. Need**

It had been a long day. People kept coming for healing and to listen to the Lord in the hope that they might hear something that would help them as they went about their days. Earlier, Jesus commanded the disciples to go into the villages with nothing more than a staff, their sandals, and the clothes on their backs. They could take no food or money with them. After they finished their labors, Jesus told them they could go to a place and rest. However, there were so many people coming and going, needing help, and asking for prayer that there was no time to eat. So when the disciples finally had a chance to feed themselves, they dispensed with shared traditions and began eating as soon as possible. They were hungry, and who could blame them for not taking the time to observe cleansing rituals.

And then the Pharisees arrived. They were so intent on noticing that laws and rituals were not being followed that they completely overlooked the need right in front of them. People were hungry, and they needed to eat. It was easier for the Pharisees to judge the disciples than it was to provide for them. Why did the Pharisees not offer bowls of water to the disciples and so they could wash their hands? Insisting that one follow the letter of the law while ignoring a need reveals to us what people value and their true intentions. And if those same people have discretionary power when it

comes to implementing laws, we are right to ask if they are using rules to serve themselves or God?

Jesus outlines this very clearly when in Mark 7:9-13 (which is not included in our reading) he says: “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! <sup>10</sup> For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.’ <sup>11</sup> But you say that if anyone tells father or mother, ‘Whatever support you might have had from me is Corban’ (that is, an offering to God<sup>[u]</sup>)— <sup>12</sup> then you no longer permit doing anything for a father or mother, <sup>13</sup> thus making void the word of God through your tradition that you have handed on. And you do many things like this.” Jesus is clear if we use human law to deny the needs of God’s beloved and if we use the law as an excuse to not care for one another, then we may be “abandoning the commandment of God to hold onto human tradition.”

The meaning and purpose of human law have many definitions. Essentially, the law helps us order our lives, live successfully in a community, and create structure. A good law is fair, just, merciful, equitable, and inclusive. However, sometimes human laws are made that are harmful. These laws deny people their rights, prevent access to resources, and have intended consequences designed to demean human dignity and acceptance. Bad laws usually favor one group over another, are often ill-conceived, and have unintended negative consequences. Sometimes humans enact these laws because they are afraid, outraged, and fearful. In those moments, reason is replaced by emotion, and human needs are ignored and forgotten.

When a law is wrong, we can ask the legal community to review the law. We can ask our legislators to rewrite or correct the law. After all, they are supposed to be working for us. When we see a terrible law coming, we can use advocacy and take legal and peaceful actions to speak truth to power to seek better and fairer options. We can ask that when we enact laws, that those laws serve and protect everyone and not just a chosen few. We can and should ask our leaders to pass laws that meet the needs of God's beloved.

In California, we do not see the types of voter registration laws being enacted by other states. That does not mean that we have no stake in this discourse. The right to vote is essential, and we are at a critical crossroads regarding voting. Everyone who has the right to vote is given a voice in saying what they want their elected leaders to do on their behalf. Voting expresses our values and our beliefs about how our society should function. Restrictive voting practices deny people their right to be heard. Limited accessibility to the ballot box makes it hard for some to have their say. For example, limited accessibility before and during an election may make it nearly impossible for someone with a disability, lack of transportation, or who cannot leave work, to participate in the process.

Sometimes it is not a law; it is the bureaucratic implementation of a regulation or a rule that ignores a pressing need. While I do not know all the ins and outs of what it takes to receive a visa to enter the United States after working with our military during a war, it should not take years for this process to unfold. I read stories of Afghan people who risked their lives to help Americans waiting for as long as nine

years to get a visa. Why? Despite letters of recommendations and appeals to legislators, people known to the American military (who had to be vetted to perform their jobs) wait in desperate limbo for someone, somewhere to help them. This situation is heartbreaking. Are regulations and rules worth more than human lives? Is there no way to protect our allies and have a process that works for them and ensures our security?

Each person needs to search their heart and discern appropriate actions from God to focus on human needs while adhering to human law. What is in our hearts is revealed by the steps we take. If we want human law to be fair, just, equitable in its administration, merciful, and mindful of human need, we need to find ways to align human laws with the commandments given to us by Jesus. Guided by our faith, Scripture, our Baptismal Covenant, and our shared understanding of what God wants from us, we can take heart that as “doers of the Word,” we are truly doing God’s work in the world.

I do not know about you; sometimes, I forget that we find our spiritual core in our simple acts of caring and kindness for those in need. We see this when we participate in pastoral care, help each other during and after disasters, and stop and listen to someone carrying an emotional burden. We are also doers of the Word when we advocate for equity, fairness, and justice. We are doers of the Word when we vote and when we insist that our laws and regulations take into account the needs of God’s children.