

Sermon for August 29, 2021

Shivon Miller

I have a very specific memory from the first few years of being a parent. I remember feeling ready and excited about becoming a parent but wanting the first few years of life to last a long time because I feared I may not be as ready for “parenting.” I had this sense that changing diapers and midnight feedings would be easy compared to what was coming. Sure enough the child grew and “parenting” proved challenging. “Parenting” required not only that you knew how to do some things but also that you knew why you were doing those things. It required that you develop the ability to communicate those “why” reasons to the child you were raising in a way that they too would grow to desire to do those same things on their own.

Of course there is a period of time in parenting where you can simply respond to your child’s “why”s with the famous parenting words “because I said so.” “Why do I have to eat my vegetables?” - “Because I said so”, “Why do I have to go to bed?” “Because I said so.” “Why do I have to get up and go to church?” “Because I said so.” But at some point you realize you want your child to understand the deeper reasons for the actions. You know you want to help develop their understanding in a way that they are able to choose the behavior for the long haul because it matters, not just because you said so.

The most terrifying memory I carry from this phase of parenting is the moment I realized I could not always articulate the “why”s for the action I was demanding. There were moments where I realized there were things we were doing, patterns we were continuing not because they had purpose but simply because that was the way things had always been or I as a parent had some preconceived notion that this was an expectation all parents enforced. When my child asked “why?” I sometimes found I had to pause for a minute and consider the “why” myself. Sometimes when I am asked “why?” I find I must honestly respond “I don’t know,” and together we have to reconsider purpose and intent. What is the heart behind the desired action?

I think this is what is happening for the Pharisees in today’s gospel reading. They watch as Jesus’ disciples begin to eat without washing their hands and they loudly jump in to parent. The disciples should wash their hands – this is the tradition of the elders. They should do it because the elders say so. And Jesus seems to turn and look at them with the look so familiar to any parent who has raised a child age 3 and up. Jesus challenges their demand and their “why” reasoning. Jesus, calling them hypocrites, accuses them of lip service, of teaching human precepts as doctrines, as holding to human tradition instead of basing their actions, their “why”s, on God’s commands.

You see, the Pharisees, in an attempt to live holy lives, to create tangibles to reflect their righteousness, have added pages upon pages of rules and practices. They had all kinds of “say so”s. But Jesus suggests that they have lost sight of the “why,” the purpose behind the actions,

the heart of matter. He says “You abandon the command of God.” What is the command of God and why do you do it?

This brings us back to our first reading today in which Moses calls the Israelites to give heed to the statutes and ordinances that they are being taught. In the chapter right after today’s reading God gives Moses the 10 commandments. What is the command of God? Some of you may remember the Confirmation hand motions for remembering them: 1st command hold up one finger “One God – have no other gods”, 2nd command two fingers in the shape of a “V” – do not take the Lord’s name in vain. 3rd command 3 fingers making a “W” for worship – remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. 4th command 4 fingers in a salute – honor your father and mother. 5th command five fingers in a stop sign pose – stop, do not kill. 6th command five fingers on one hand, and your pointer as the sixth finger pointing to the ring finger where a wedding band would be worn – do not commit adultery, 7th command, seven fingers - your pointer and thumb being two fingers on one hand grabbing your other hand of five fingers – do not steal. The 8th command, eight fingers, four on each side making bear claws – do not bear false witness. The 9th command using 9 fingers to make a roof shape, shortening the command – do not covet your neighbor’s house. The 10th using all your fingers to make a “gimmie” motion with greedy hands – do not covet anything that is your neighbors. These are the commandments of God, and right before saying any of these commands God says “I am the Lord your God” – “because I said so.”

But the words from Moses today explain the “why” further. Do these not just because “I said so,” but “so that you may live into the abundant life God desires for you” – in the case of the Israelites, entering and occupying the land God is giving them. And Moses goes on – Do these because it will show your wisdom and discernment and you will be known as great and wise discerning people. And why is it important to be known as great and wise discerning people? Because then others will know God is so near and so just. Why do the commands? What is at the heart? God is so near and so just.

When Jesus is challenged to name the greatest commandment, he responds “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself.” This is the “why” behind the commandments – the heart of the first three commandments are about loving God, the heart of the last seven commands about loving one another. What is at the heart of the rules – love for God and each other. “Why?” because this is the abundant life God desires for you, because by doing this others will see we are a wise and discerning people. Because by this, we ourselves and others will know God is so near and so just.

The Pharisees confront Jesus and the disciples – they must wash their hands. But Jesus poses a challenge – do they know the purpose, the heart behind the command or has the intent, the “why” gotten lost and the rule become only an empty practice? Our James text today poses the same challenge to us – does religion, do we the people, know the purpose, the heart behind the organization and practice, or has our “why” gotten lost on empty rules? “Why?” do we do what

we do? Can we answer: because we love God and others, because this is the abundant life God desires for the world, because we are to be wise and discerning people so that all may know that God is near and God is just. Our James scripture reads "Be doers of the Word." When asked "why" we do what we do, we need to be able to answer because we are striving to do "the Word of God."

Oh how we love our children. This is the heart behind all the expected actions, the real answer to all the "why"s. Oh how God loves you. This is the heart behind the call to be doers of the Word, the real answer to all the "why"s. God is so near and God is so just. Amen.