

Sermon
14 Pentecost—Proper 17-B-2
August 29, 2021
St. Andrew's, Methuen
William Bradbury

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
Psalm 15
James 1:17-27
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

(We remember Marine Sargeant Johanny Rosario of Lawrence, who was killed in the suicide bombing in Kabul this week.)

Tell me about your practice?

Ask a doctor about her practice and she'll say: "I'm a pediatrician who helps sick children."

Ask an attorney about his practice and he'll say, "I practice real estate law, helping people buy a home."

Ask Mac Jones the rookie quarterback for the Patriots about his practice and he'll say, "I practice the coaches game plan to give us the best chance to win".

Ask a Buddhist about her practice and she'll say, "I practice daily meditation and moment to moment mindfulness to calm my mind and my world."

Ask a Muslim about his practice and he'll say, "I pray to Allah 5 times a day with my head on the ground to bring peace.

Ask certain **1st century Jews and they may tell you, "We** practice a ritual washing to remove contamination from contact with unclean people.

This practice of washing has a powerful and positive benefit, because **every time he washes, he remembers who he is—he remembers that he is a member of the covenant community of the One Living God.**

Kids join gangs today, not because they like violence, but because the gang gives them an identity as a member of a community of brothers and sisters who protect the neighborhood against the evil gangs down the street.

Every Sunday we celebrate Holy Communion, we remember who we are in Christ, who says, “do this, to remember me.”

Tell me about your practice?

Back in the day, I knew people who had their name on the church role but did not practice their faith. I think of those parents who never bring their newly baptized children back to church until it’s time for a wedding.

Unfortunately, those children will find their identity, not from Jesus Christ, but from their peers at school and from social media.

Therefore, practicing our faith is not an option, but a necessity if we would grow into our identity as member of God’s family.

But Jesus also teaches us today that our spiritual practices can have a dark side to them: As we practice our faith, we will be tempted to judge those outside our community, as less than us—less faithful, less virtuous, less worthy than us—thus making them in some cases **repulsive to us.**

Once our Christian ancestors saw Native Americans and people from Africa as dirty and repulsive, then it was easy to take away their “life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.”

Back in my childhood neighborhood Catholic and Protestant parents told their kids never to enter the others church buildings, lest they become contaminated.

So, Jesus wants us to be clear today that our contamination comes, not from others but from within our own hearts.

 The summer of 1975 after my first year of seminary, I did my Clinical Pastoral Education at what then was called the Georgia Retardation Center in northeast Atlanta. One of my assigned units was for infants and toddlers who were mentally compromised and physically disfigured. I was deeply uncomfortable around these children, because they did not fit my image of what a beautiful baby should be.

I found them repulsive, but I noticed there were these women called “volunteer grandparents” who had no trouble embracing and enjoying these little kids.

Jesus is right: the problem wasn’t in the kids but in me.

 James says that true religion, which we asked God to give us in our Collect of the Day, is to embrace and care for “orphans and widows”—which

sounds easy enough, **until you learn most of these were living on the garbage dump outside the city.**

Who do you find repulsive? --The disfigured, the old, the dying, immigrants, the dirty poor, or maybe even the filthy rich?

Is it the vaccinated or the unvaccinated, the masked or the unmasked, who repulse us?

I think here of Saint Francis: The most admired but least imitated of all the saints: As a young man he was in love with his own beauty and strength, and found the wandering bands of lepers to be deeply repulsive.

He said, "When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure". But one day, God led Francis to embrace a leper with the same embrace he received from Christ.

He said, "When I had once become acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became a source of spiritual and physical consolation for me."

See The Ecstasies of Saint Francis, John Haule, page 30

As Boston Jungian Analyst John Haule puts it, embracing the lepers meant that Francis is "no longer thinking primarily of himself and his own safety and comfort....[and] All [that] left-over energy is immediately converted to joy and exaltation" and this experience transports Francis into the sacred cosmos, or what Jesus calls the Realm of God. Ibid, page31

Therefore, Francis begins the practice of going toward those who repulse him because that's where the joy of Christ is experienced.

As he practices living this way in the Realm of God, Francis is free to embrace not only the poor, but also the Pope; not only Christians, but also Muslims as when he goes to Jerusalem to broker peace with the Sultan of Egypt.

James says "be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."

Doing the word means **practicing whatever we see Christ the Word doing.**

Jesus Christ, it is rightly said, is our way to the Father. But this is true only because Jesus Christ is the Father's way to us. On the cross Jesus embraces us one by one and all of us together in all our imagined repulsive brokenness.

Therefore, in addition to our daily practices of worship, prayer, Bible Study, and serving our neighbor, let's **add the practice of embracing** those who repulse us. Let's **take that inner feeling of revulsion as a call from Christ to move toward those we'd rather move away from.**

Richard Rohr tells us, "We do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking."

Which is to say that it is only through practice that we learn how God is embracing us in Jesus Christ.