

“Living Our Inheritance in the Period of Recommitment” by David Lloyd

**September 2,
2018**



Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Learners and Teachers Mission Group signed up to preach the first four weeks of September. Today is the last Sunday of the theme “Living with our Inheritance” and next Sunday will be the first under the theme of “Recommitment 2018,” which will continue until the third Sunday of October.

Somewhat to my surprise, I think that the lectionary for this week serves as a bridge between the two themes. The Deuteronomy passage emphasizes the importance of the Jewish legacy, the teachings of Torah, the Ten Commandments. It contains a warning that the teachings are not just something to be remembered nostalgically but rather are to be implemented daily in all the ways that they affect everyone’s

lives and they are to be taught by example to one's children and grandchildren. The teachings were to create a people chosen by God whose faithfulness to the God who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt into freedom would be rewarded with good living in the Promised Land, a people distinct from and a model for those surrounding nations. The teachings in the Torah included practices that distinguished between pure and impure objects and situations, so that impure objects and situations could be avoided. The teachings also specified rituals to restore back to purity those who had become impure. Some of those distinctions between pure and impure were common to other cultures in the Fertile Crescent, some of them were based on safety and hygiene, and some of them were unique to the Hebrews.

Unlearned people may have followed specific cultural practices with no idea whether these practices were required by the Torah. Some practices would have been so ingrained that failure to follow them would have caused raised eyebrows at the least and outrage at the greatest. Let me give you an example. When I was in the Peace Corps in Ethiopia there was a standard practice for eating in restaurants outside the larger cities. The first thing you did was proceed to a corner of the room where there was a little stand with a keg of water, a bar of soap, and a damp (and usually threadbare rag) of a towel where you washed your hands. Then you sat down at a long table and a plate of injera and wat was placed in front of you. You dug in, eating only with your right hand because your left hand was used only for toileting. When a second person entered, washed, and sat down near you, you pushed your plate so that he could share your food until he was served. It didn't matter whether this custom was religious, coming from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, from some older regional code of hospitality, or a tribal practice. You just did it and if you were a foreigner and didn't know the practices, usually a person in the room quickly told you what you were supposed to do. I got to like

sharing my plate – it fostered community, if only for a few minutes. It was table fellowship.

By the time Mark's gospel was written, the early Church had been growing far more rapidly among Gentiles than it was among Jews. From St. Paul's letters and from Luke's later account in Acts we know that Jews who believed in Jesus as the Messiah generally encountered a negative reaction in the synagogues throughout the Greco-Roman world. And so the apostles found converts among the Gentiles.

But there were several stumbling blocks for converting Gentiles to Christianity. The largest was that Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, the early leaders of the Church insisted that Gentile Christian men had to be circumcised. And they also insisted that Gentile Christians had to follow the Jewish dietary laws. The Book of Acts relates these controversies between these leaders and Paul and Peter, who didn't think Gentiles had to become Jews before becoming Christians. And Jewish Christians in Jerusalem and elsewhere may have insisted Gentile Christians follow other Jewish traditions. This week's gospel may reflect that. We could sum it up by asking, exactly what was the inheritance Gentile Christians were to live?

We don't know who Mark was addressing his Gospel to. He could have been writing to Gentile converts and attempting to explain to them why the Jews they encountered were so hostile. He could have been writing to congregations of mixed Gentile and Jewish converts; such congregations were likely to be having dissension over what Jewish practices they should follow.

By the time of Jesus, the practice of washing hands before eating was well ingrained and the Pharisees insisted upon it. Seeing some of Jesus' disciples eating without having washed their hands, the Pharisees and scribes challenged Jesus about his disciples' behavior. To our ears Mark depicts Jesus

responding with restraint, merely calling them hypocrites by focusing on a tradition rather than on commandments in the Torah. But to a Pharisee being called a hypocrite would have stung severely because they took great care to scrupulously follow the commandments.

Mark continues by having Jesus tell a larger group of people on another occasion that nothing that goes into a person from the outside can defile the person. Rather, it is the things that come out of the person that defile the person. At first blush this may be a reference to whether Jesus' disciples needed to keep kosher, because a failure to follow the dietary rules would make the person ritually unclean. But Jesus focuses not on the digestive system, but on the person's soul – it's not important what the person eats or drinks but rather what the person gives to the world: good thoughts or evil thoughts; acts of sexual restraint and fidelity or indecency, fornication, and adultery; thankfulness for what one has or envy, ruthless greed, fraud, and theft; good will or arrogance, slander, and malice. Mark has Jesus shift the whole paradigm from focusing on the externals of religious practice to questions about the essence of the Torah – what is the right behavior God expects of people of faith? Is it following practices regardless of whether they build up (or tear down) community? Or is it following practices that flow from the heart that build up community? What behaviors are our legacy, our inheritance? What is our inheritance as Seekers Church, a church in the tradition of the Church of the Saviour?

From his experience as an Army chaplain during World War II, Gordon Cosby, founder of the Church of the Saviour, developed an inheritance for us. Gordon saw that people need to surrender their will and travel into the heart of Christ (the inward journey) and to be called a mission to remake the world as God would have it (the outward journey), the way military personnel are called to surrender their individual wills and

develop trust in their unit and their military leadership in order to serve a higher calling, their country. He saw that Christians need training and periodic retraining in how to live our faith (the School for Christian Living/Growth), the way military personnel get regular retraining. He saw that Christians need accountability for their spiritual journeys and the exercise of their spiritual gifts (mission groups and regular spiritual reports) to avoid backsliding, the way military personnel and operations are evaluated against standards and identify lessons to be learned and practiced for future operations. And Gordon saw Christians needing annual decisions to commit to the life of faith (Recommitment Sunday) the way military personnel have periodic opportunities to reenlist or to reenter civilian life. And so, one of our legacies from the Church of the Saviour is Recommitment Sunday, when those who choose to become part of the congregation for another year publicly state their commitment, and when the Stewards who govern Seekers who choose to be Stewards another year state their commitment. Recommitment season is a time for reflection on what it means to make a commitment to this local expression of the Body of Christ, a reflection that takes place in our daily devotions, in our spiritual reports to our mission group, in our mission group discussions, and in the October Stewards meeting.

But our inheritance from the Church of the Saviour doesn't need to be rigid and stifling. From its formation Seekers Church chose to live out the heart of our inheritance, even as we intentionally changed some of the forms. Marjory Bankson's book, *Stalking the Spirit*, lays out some of those changes and the reactions from some Church of the Saviour members in the other congregations. And some of those congregations made changes, too, intentionally and unintentionally, that have shaped them. I think Mark would approve. I hope and I believe that Jesus would too.

The Letter from James is generally thought to have been

written to Jewish Christians. There is debate as to when it was written and who wrote it. I suspect that the writer of James would still revere the Torah, but not because it was the Torah, not because it was the tradition. Rather, he would see following the Torah and following Jesus as the means of guiding us to the true life of faith God desires for us.

For the essence of James' letter is the same as the essence of the gospels: God wants us to live joyously, thankfully, sympathetically sharing the feelings and lives of others, building up the community of faith. That is our inheritance. And, like the writers of Deuteronomy, the author of James knows that thinking that we should live that way, knowing how we can live that way, is not enough. We must actually live that way. We must live our inheritance. We must be committed. James' letter makes it clear that thinking and believing without actually doing what God wants is dead faith, no faith, faithless.

To live our inheritance requires commitment. It requires me and you to do some inner work, hard inner work. Am I going to think only of myself because life is short and I live in fear that I don't have enough for myself and my loved ones? Am I going to ignore the political and economic structures of society that cause misery for so many because I am afraid or feel powerless? Am I going to respond to injustice simply with anger and hatred and vindictiveness toward the perpetrator? It is a hard journey inward, a pilgrimage really, that with God's help will lead to a journey outward, a pilgrimage to community. It is a journey, a pilgrimage, that requires self-discipline and accountability if it is to be successful.

The good news is that when we see our common humanity and commit ourselves to forming the community God would have us form, we elicit gifts in each other that we weren't aware of. I find gifts in others that they may not be fully using and to my surprise they find unused gifts in me. I have been a

member of a mission group for 30 years, but it was only in the last five that I was affirmed as a moderator. If we really commit to caring for each other, evoking each others' gifts, and supporting each other, we change from being dysfunctional individuals in a dysfunctional society to being part of a functional body, the Body of Christ that has the potential to change society into becoming functional.

So, as we are about to begin recommitment season, let us reflect on our inheritance and decide to live it! Let us eat this Bread of Life, let us drink this Cup of a New Covenant, to strengthen us as each of us decides whether to commit to be the Body of Christ.