

“Of Statutes and Ordinances”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 2, 2018

15th Sunday after Pentecost

James 1:17-27

Rev. John Wahl

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

Over the past few weeks, we have been discussing worship – specifically the *why* and the *where* of our worship. Gathered together in God’s house, we look for guidance, for fellowship, for forgiveness, and for strength to be sent out into the world. We looked at the example of King Solomon who sought wisdom in order to lead his people with justice, and who built a Temple for God to be encountered by the congregation who gathered there. Still, as we were reminded, God cannot be contained by any human-built structure, but is out ahead of us, and alongside us, each day and everywhere.

Today, we hear from another giant in Israel’s history, Moses. The book of Deuteronomy (from a Greek word meaning “the second law”) consists of a series of speeches given by Moses to a generation of Israelites who are about to enter into the Promised Land. This generation are the children of the Exodus people who had been slaves in Egypt; the original recipients of the Ten Commandments and Torah law. Moses is speaking to prepare them for their new life in a new land, in the midst of people who worship different gods. So that they will know who God is calling them to be, Moses reminds them of these stories about God and their ancestors.

On this threshold of a new day, and a new place, Moses repeats to them the importance of following the laws of their ancestors, collectively called “statutes and ordinances” in the book of Deuteronomy. Not simply commands issued from on high, these are teachings patiently given to form the character of the people. Rather than perfection, their intent is to bring life; representing the wisdom of the years communicated to the people so that they might learn and benefit from the experiences of previous generations to enable a higher quality of life.¹

While these “statutes and ordinances” provide the pathway to life, they do not take root in the hearts and minds of the people by osmosis. It is not enough for God to have inscribed the commandments on tablets of stone and for them sit inside of the ark that has been created. And so, Moses’ urgent hope is that people

¹ Steed Davidson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

of Israel will hear, listen, and obey; that they will do what God teaches them to do, and that in their listening and acting they will be formed – day by day – as a people of faith.

In order for this to take place, the stories need to be retold; the commandments need to be remembered by a new generation. Therefore, worship and education are important so that what has been learned by previous generations will not be lost; and also so that they will be prepared to take on the challenges of a new day. Obedience is not a good in itself; but instead works for the promotion of a good and just world. Those who follow God’s “statutes and ordinances” bring about the vision of a righteous community.

This is our hope in worship as well: that we might re-tell the story in order to remember the gracious guidance of God. We share in Moses’ hope that our children might experience the blessing of life. We want them to cross over to a place where they can enter in and claim the inheritance that God has prepared for them. A new generation stands at the threshold and we are their teachers. We are the ones who have been entrusted with our people’s memory and testimony.²

Therefore, it is vital that we think about not just the *why* and *where* of our worship, but also the *how*. What are the tools and traditions that we will employ to best remember and pass along the wisdom of one generation to the next? How can we best prepare ourselves and those who will come after us to re-tell the story of God’s great love for the world – a love so deep that God gave his only Son for our sake and our salvation?

We are a liturgical church: liturgy is the work of the people; and in our worship, we ask the people to be at work. This takes place as the congregation prays and sings, as it takes part in call and response, as it offers to each other the peace of Christ and the gifts of their time, talent and labor. In our tradition, worship is offered as a partnership between the laity – who, here at Valley, are called to serve in the roles of liturgist, greeter, usher and musician – and the ordained clergy – who are given the designated duties of proclaiming the word and rightly administering the sacraments. Because of this participatory partnership, liturgical churches are known for following a program; for having an “order” to its worship, so that it might have a recognizable flow and format. While not always exactly the same, we believe that following an ordered pattern of worship helps in the process of remembering; that ritual is not for the sake of simplicity, but so that

² Anthea Portier-Young from *WorkingPreacher.com*

the various components of worship – welcoming, confessing, reconciling, listening, responding, giving and blessing – might truly sink in.

Other churches do things in different ways. Some churches are less liturgical; to us, they may even seem at times like performances, with the congregation not at work, but serving as an audience. Still other churches might seem even more liturgical; they appear to be almost exactly the same every week, done almost by rote memory. During seminary, I worked in a Lutheran church and their 8 a.m. worship service came directly out of a prayer book from the 1930's. Almost every Sunday, sitting on the front row, were a handful of elderly women who, though partially or completely blind, could faithfully recite the liturgy – complete with all of its “thees” and “thous” – without missing a beat.

You may be more comfortable or familiar with worship that is more or less liturgical than our tradition. You might prefer a service that is louder with more emphatic responses, or quieter and more contemplative. Some of you might miss the “smells and bells” of the worship services of your youth; others might be more familiar with campfire songs and altar calls. When we talk about the *how* of worship, there are innumerable different rituals, styles and traditions. What is more important, after all, is whether worship is where God is met; and if worship helps us to remember what God has taught us.

As they prepare to enter into the land promised to them by God, Israel is encouraged by Moses to obey the “statutes and ordinances” that have been set before them. At stake is both the possession of this land and life itself. Israel’s renown among the nations will be won, not through conquest and military might, but by dedicated observance of the principles of life in relationship with God before the watching eyes of those around them.³

What is at stake for us is something equally important. While we may not physically be entering into a new land, in many ways we are also on a type of journey into a different place; a new era where being part of an institutional church is no longer a given; where spending Sunday at worship cannot be assumed as the norm. In this new place, where – to many – God’s story is no longer known, it is up to us to remember and re-tell it. Though some are no longer looking for it, the church remains a city on the hill where the light of God shines brightly from us and through us. Though not all of our children’s generation are here, it is still our calling to be their teachers; to reflect and thus instill the importance of the “statutes

³ Alistair Roberts, “The Politics of Extraordinary Ordinarity”

and ordinances” of God. In worship, the liturgy – the work of the people – remains important; not the exact *how*, but that songs are sung, prayers are offered, mercy is promised, forgiveness is granted, service is honored, and hope is renewed.

In these ways, worship is the work of the people of God: a rich partnership between lay and clergy, speakers and singers, greeters and ushers, bulletin folders, microphone testers, banner hangers and more. It is the common work of every generation; all who pray together, who greet with a hug or a smile, who listen with an attentive ear, who offer their prayer requests aloud or silently in their hearts, who come to the table, or make room for others to come as well. Worship helps us to remember; and therefore to learn something new about ourselves, our neighbor, our world, and our God. It is the work of the people and, as this morning’s reading from James reminds us, faith alone without works is not living. But God, revealed and remembered in worship – and in the ways we respond to worship – lives and gives us life. AMEN.