

July 4, 2010; Proper 9C
2 Kings 5:1-14; Ps 30
Gal 6:1-16; Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

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Like many teenagers, George Washington was concerned with who he was becoming and how to fit in to the social world around him. Since there was a dearth of fashion magazines and pop icons to give him guidance, he transcribed for himself a set of one hundred ten “Rules of Civility” originally written by French Jesuits, by which he hoped to govern his behavior -- basically, Miss Manners for the eighteenth century gentleman. Ranging from table manners to dress to conversation, they offered guidance to a young up-and-comer; how to be among people without offending them:

- Every Action done in Company, ought to be with Some Sign of Respect, to those that are Present.
- When in Company, put not your Hands to any Part of the Body, not usually Discovered. (“Discovered” means “uncovered.”)
- Shew Nothing to your Freind that may affright him....
- Shew not yourself glad at the Misfortune of another though he were your enemy.
- When you see a Crime punished, you may be inwardly Pleased; but always shew Pity to the Suffering Offender...
- Labour to keep alive in your Breast that Little Spark of Celestial fire Called Conscience.”¹

Historians have made much of this document, not because the rules are, themselves, particularly interesting, but because the fact that Washington copied them at all may yield insight into the man he was becoming. They are, in other words, a kind of founding document of our nation’s founding father.

Our nation may espouse the idea of the rugged individual, but the basic social questions -- how to live among others, how not to offend, when (perhaps) giving offense is OK -- are not trivial. Without a consensus of some sort, life as a society becomes impossible, bonds break down, agreements cannot be reached. In an extreme case, people begin to die. They can wither away as others refuse to accord them the basic necessities of life or they can kill each other. The men and women in a street gang fight for their honor with no less vigilance than a soldier or a corporate executive; indeed, if nobody around you seems to grant you respect, you might be more likely to become combative in order to gain it.

Jesus, too, was aware of these concerns, which is why he has two sets of core teachings, not one. The first, the Sermon on the Mount, concerns the matters of the heart and of the soul: how to set priorities for our lives, how to school our spirit in faithfulness, what it means to live in loving ways. The second, which we heard today, is the Missionary Discourse: a set of guidelines on how to live among strangers -- etiquette, in other words.

Jesus begins with an admonition which is strange and sobering: “I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.” (Luke 10: 3) Codes of conduct for corporate success do not begin like that! The key thing about a lamb, of course, is that it is helpless, unable to defend itself. It does not have teeth which will bite hard; it weighs too little to use its hooves in a fight; it cannot yet eat grass, but must derive its very food from the breast of its mother. Left among wolves, it will be rent into pieces -- as too many early Christians were. Why, then, would Jesus choose to send out his disciples in this way?

¹ Taken from *Rules of Civility & Decent Behaviour in Company and Conversation: a Book of Etiquette*. Williamsburg, VA: Beaver Press, 1971.

Precisely because it is NOT the way of this world.

Jesus is sending the disciples to be ambassadors of a new creation, agents of a better world interpenetrating our own. Listen to the words of St. Paul, who did enough journeying for ten missionaries: “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!” (Gal 6: 14-15) Those who speak for Christ -- and that includes all of us -- do so not as natives of the world around us, but as immigrants from a new creation, a place in which the old rules and ways no longer matter. We are harbingers of the New Jerusalem, the city which descends from the heavens to restore the earth at the end of time. That’s why Christ forbids the seventy to bring food, money, or sandals: they are to model radical trust that what they need will be provided (as in Eden); they are not to wear shoes (which were given to us after our Fall). These are not prudent policies. They guaranty neither safety nor a future. There is real danger in being a disciple.

Perhaps that is why so much of the rest of this discourse is concerned with making and keeping peace, for peace is both the path to our final home and its hallmark. Jesus’ advice is simple, but effective: Do not play favorites. Do not play people off against one another. Anyone who has ever participated in a small community (a class, a church, a club, a workplace) knows what this is about. When Mr. Smith takes you to lunch, and all you can talk about is how Mrs. Chanda took you to a much better restaurant, resentment happens. Not only will Mr. Smith be mad at you, he may well begin to resent Mrs. Chanda.

If you are invited as a guest to your friend Jane’s home, but, once you arrive, you spend all your time with her neighbor Lydia, Jane will resent it, and Lydia may begin to vaunt herself. And, if you leave Jane’s home entirely and move into Lydia’s guest-room, there will be division in the community between the friends of Jane and the friends of Lydia -- particularly if you are seen as a kind of dignitary, and if hosting you is viewed as an honor. And if you move from the small house of a poor person to the gracious home of a wealthy one, the slight on the poor person is doubled, for the wealthy host can make you comfortable with his scraps, but the poor person you rejected may have been giving you everything he had: the insult would be double. That is, most likely, why Cain killed Abel: God accepted Abel’s offering, but refused the offering of Cain. Rejection kills.

Instead of seeking his or her own pleasure or comfort above all, the disciple is to accept everything offered with gratitude: Cheez Whiz as well as lobster pie. To do so is to heal the sick: to restore dignity to those who have been degraded or scorned, to give honor to the humble as well as to the rich. We may not all cast out demons or cure cancer, but every one of us can repair the dignity of those we encounter every day. It may be as easy as acknowledging the homeless person, taking tea with the co-worker who has just separated from a spouse, or bracing ourselves to eat lunch with the class pariah (on the playground, where everyone can see). Or it may be as difficult as challenging someone on a racist act, holding our office accountable for the way they treat differently abled employees, or refusing to take sides in a family quarrel. St. Paul makes the challenge even harder: restore those who have done wrong (Gal 6:1). Don’t cast them out, but restore them. Call them to account and help them change; then accept them. Make peace. Heal others. And be prepared for them to turn on you.

Even then, Christ says, vengeance belongs to God. We may shake the dust off our feet² when we are rejected, but that is all we may do. The symbolic gesture gives us some relief for our frustration, rage, and disappointment, but only God is allowed to carry on the vendetta. We may do no harm. God has given us power over the enemy, but it is power to heal and not to kill. In last week’s reading, a group of Samaritans rejects Jesus, and the disciples ask him, “Lord, do you want us

² Every culture has its version of hand gestures for these occasions!

to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” (Luke 9:54) (You can just hear the eagerness, can’t you?) But he rebuked them; that desire for vengeance, which seems natural to us, is part of our fallen nature. We are to be different.

That “difference” -- concern for others above the concern for ourselves, the willingness to put ourselves out for the welfare of those around us, avoiding factions, fomenting peace, and upholding dignity -- is as essential for the welfare of a nation as it is for a small community. And yet, we are at a point in our nation’s history at which many of those principles seem to be disregarded. Our legislative bodies are dominated by blind faction, with the most contentious votes dividing on strict party lines. Political rhetoric is heated and corrosive, aimed at persons rather than at ideas, replacing logical discussion of policy with clever swipes at personality. Whole groups of peoples are dismissed from the conversation based on the nation they come from, the language they speak, and the people they choose to love. We expend more energy on assigning blame for our problems than on finding solutions. These are not the signs of a healthy nation.

In his farewell address to our nation, George Washington warned: “However [political parties] may now and then answer popular ends, they are likely in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government, destroying afterwards the very engines which have lifted them to unjust dominion.”³ If we do not live together, we will perish alone.

Jesus’ words to his disciples, naive though they may seem, offer an antidote to the poison of our times. It may be dangerous to live as a disciple, but the real danger lies in not being *enough* like a disciple. A lamb among wolves may not live long, but when even the lamb turns and rends the wolves, there is no longer a presence of peace in this world. If the loaf has no leaven, it falls flat. If the seed refuses to be planted in the ground, there is no harvest the next year. The choice is ours. “So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all.” (Gal 6:9-10)

³ Farewell address, 1796.