

Choose Life

CHURCH OF SAINT CLEMENT·TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 2020·16 MINUTES18 Reads

By the Rev. Patricia Lyons

My friends, I speak to you in the name of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I'm so excited to preach this morning, I can hardly stand it. In our readings today, we have before us the very definition of what it means to be a moral person if you are an Episcopalian. And by the way, there IS a particular way to be a moral person as an Episcopalian.

I cannot tell you how many times I meet someone who has joined The Episcopal Church as did I. I'm a convert in my 30s to the Episcopal Church, coming from the Catholic Church, which many people do who enter the Episcopal Church. You hear phrases like, "I'm so happy to be an Episcopalian because you can believe whatever you want." Or, "I'm so happy to be an Episcopalian because you're not judged for anything." Or, "In the Episcopal Church, we don't get hung up on black and white, right and wrong kind of thinking..."

My friends, these are packs of lies and actually bad news. It's like living in a neighborhood with no speed limits. There's some freedom in that – unless YOU live in that neighborhood. The Episcopal faith, though its moral habits and method are, in a sense, complicated (because life is complicated), they are solid. Although we are loving and inclusive of many ways of thinking and being, this version of Christianity does, in fact, have a solid moral theology and rock-solid moral norms. And I believe they are liberating. I'm excited this morning because we're going to touch on what they are.

When you're at a Christmas tree sale or a bake sale or shopping at Safeway, and someone starts telling you they're looking for a church that believes nothing absolutely and there's no guilt, please don't say, "Join mine!" We do have moral

absolutes and sacred ways of deciding right and wrong that we have inherited not made. Please remember that sure, there is no guilt where there is no law, but there is no freedom and there is no clarity when there is no way. Truth liberates us. There is moral truth in this tradition. There is a fixed moral way through human life. At times in Christian history we have sadly acted like the moral way is the only way of Jesus, that being a Christian means first and foremost, to be a moral person. But this is not true. The moral life is part of the Christian life. It is a very, very important part of the Christian life, but the moral life is only a part of the life that follows Jesus.

Think of the moral life as one slice of the whole pizza. For example, I think about my own marriage: there's a moral component to it. There are some rules. But if you ask me why I'm married or how it's going and I start describing only the moral life of my marriage and tell you only the things I can and can't do, 10 minutes in, you probably feel like I've missed the point of marriage. On the other hand, think of the Jenga Game. If you pull out the moral life from a married life, many other things fall apart. The moral life can be essential without being everything.

Let's get very specific of how we wound up in this problem in the first place, that is, acting that following Jesus is a moral challenge and nothing more. Many of us are about to go into Lent. Let's remember when these readings arrive in the liturgical year. We just finished the whole Christmas season. Now in Epiphany we're about to enter Lent. We have a couple of weeks before Lent when we learn about the disciples and the call of the disciples. We learn more about who Jesus is and who the followers were. There are lessons there for us in the modern world to build our sense of calling and identity as followers. We're packing wisdom for Lent right now.

Thank goodness, today is the Sunday to think about the moral life. Some of you are already determined what your moral marathon of Lent is going to be. For many of you, it's losing about 15 pounds. For others of you, it's stopping swearing, or excessive drinking or any drinking at all. You've already set a moral challenge, which means you've already demonstrated the whole history of Christianity: when faced with your love as a potential miraculous and mysterious love affair with God, you

are frightened by that and try to go to what we know: thinking of love or relationship as simply a battle of right and wrong.

You don't know how to have a Lent where you're hanging out with the Holy Spirit for 40 straight days of ecstatic joy and radical preparation for the tomb to rise from the grave in glory. That sounds very confusing or even terrifying. So you decide to handle your relationship with God in some way that feels familiar: you go to what you know. "I will do this and I will not do this." Or, "I will do less of this, and I will do more of this." You take the invitation to follow Christ in a radically intimate and life-changing way, and you turn it into the tax code because then you know what the score is. You choose to look at Christ and see laws, rather than open your heart to look at Christ and see unconditional love.

If you do this shrinking of the invitation of Christ into some kind of moral obstacle course, don't think you're lazy or weak. You're actually very historically proven in that kind of small Christianity. It's a very long story of how Christians began to think like this, but I'll keep it brief.

When Jesus left the earth after the resurrection, he does give the church, specifically church leaders, a couple of very specific directions. I don't mean love your neighbor or the Sermon on the Mount. That's teaching for all of us. There were very specific directions that were given to people who would lead the church.

One of them was to have the Eucharist. You know that one: to 'do this in remembrance of me.' Another thing Jesus commended the church leaders to do was to forgive sins. Remember those verses? Have you ever heard them? "Whatever is forgiven on earth will be forgiven in heaven and whatever is loosed on earth..." remember those? Jesus has literally given the authority to the disciples to forgive sins. This command results, over the first 200 years of the early church, in the practice of hearing confessions and giving out penances to those who confessed their sins.

I'm not going to ask you to raise your hands, but I'm sure some of you were raised in that Catholic tradition of offering confessions. I actually sat in the confessional box as a child, along with sitting in private rooms with Catholic priests. You ever seen the *Godfather*? You know what I'm talking about. In fact, in many great TV series, like the *Sopranos*, they all have this scene of confession to a priest.

That tradition starts from the beginning. What we find historically is that there were books, like manuals, to tell priests how to hear confessions. There was not formal seminary or other standard training in how to hear confessions or why. But these books would contain lists of things, like stealing or lying, and then if you turn the page, you would see what the penance should be for that particular sin. Back in the day these are called the "penitential books" or "the manuals," and we had them for a hundred years before the Bible was even organized. The apostles were trying hard to live up to the command of Jesus to hear and forgive the sins of seekers of Christ.

The penitential books told you, for centuries, what penances to give the person to repair their relationship with God or the Church. For example, for example, if you committed adultery, and then you'd have to stop and say a certain number of prayers, like Hail Marys or the Lord's Prayer. But penances were often more complicated and more corrupt than that. In the dark centuries of the church, your penance could be going to crusades for five years or pay a ton of money to the church. The practice of offering confession got really nasty and corrupt over a 1000 years of this uneven and broken practice of following locally written penitential books, often by people who cared more about sin than love or healthy spiritual relationships with God and others.

By the way, every culture had their own cherished penitential books. The Celtic books for example, now those are really interesting. Turns out there's a lot of ways you can sin as a shepherd. The Germanic cultures had their own versions, and they have lots and lots of penances for sins with money and trade and commerce, because of where the Goths were in the Empire. It is fascinating to study these books, but every one of them is more or less the same: a list of sins in chapters and

chapters, accompanied by lists and lists of hard commands for how to repent. You wonder what those manual-writers must have been doing in their spare time? How did monks even come up with hundreds of pages of such sordid human choices?

I love what they were trying to do, which was to give an answer for healing from the sins that people were committing. On the other hand, by the time the Reformation erupted across Europe, it was, in part, a result of the complete revulsion of common people to this insane and corrupt system of the science of sin and repentance.

After the Reformation, the Catholic Church tried to regroup, like an after-action report, about what they lost and why, as people fled the Catholic Church across the European continent. That regrouping conference was called the Council of Trent. Among some of the reforms, they created seminaries, in hopes that formal training for clergy might clean up the corruption and malpractice of teaching the faith. They set up schools at cathedrals and called them '*seminarium*'. That's Latin for "seedbed." The idea was that every Cathedral should have a seedbed where you actually taught people how to teach the moral life, not just have individuals walking around with their odd booklets, being poorly trained traffic cops in people's moral lives.

For the nearly 1600 years before Trent - keep in mind, the sacraments are all in Latin. Even if someone comes to your house and blesses someone who's sick, or the funerals or the Eucharist, it's all in Latin. The only thing pastoral exchange a priest spoke to a person about in their native language for 1600 years was confession. Think about that for a minute. The only sacramental ministry you experienced as a Christian for 1600 years in your own language, was a conversation about your sin, and what the thing was to fix it. Is it any wonder why people still, to this day, think of Christianity as a moral life and not a full relationship? So don't feel bad if when you look at Lent, you set on a moral project, because we've been setting our moral project to respond to Jesus for thousands of years. We often reduce faith to trying to be a moral person because for so much of our history, the Christian Church treated priests and people that way.

A wonderful thing about the Reformation, among other things, was that the Anglican Church breaks from the Catholic Church and many of its cherished texts and traditions in profound ways. This had both a traumatic and, in some ways, a cleansing effect. I'm not going to say Henry VIII was some theologian on a holy mission. Just know that God can use anyone and Henry's selfish reasons for wanting to be the Head of the Church did create space from some traditions like those of the old penitential books and their broken ways of responding to confession. The Anglican Church starts to develop its own resources and methods for teaching and directing the moral life by returning to the scriptures. And now we come to the readings for today.

What the Anglican theologians did as they formed their new church was to go back to the foundational teachings of Jesus to the disciples and the earliest beliefs and practices of the followers of Jesus in baptism, eucharist and holy living. What is the moral life? It is the fruit of a life of a follower of Jesus. It is not the goal of human life. Humans are created to be in relationship with their creator, not to strive for the moral perfection of the Creator. We are made to be with God and in that union we can be like God. Life is not intended to be the reverse, that is, seeking to be like God so that we can be in relationship with God. The moral life is not the corrupted science of the licit and the illicit in all those penitential manuals over all those centuries.

There were two Hebrew Bible readings the church offers us in the lectionary today. There's an Old Testament from Deuteronomy, and there's also from Sirach, but they both echo the same message.

Remember when Moses was on the edge of the Jordan and they finally reach the promised land? It had been 40 years (an interesting number to consider before we enter the 40 days of Lent). Remember what Moses says to the people? He doesn't go through the laws of the Torah before they enter the new land (there are 618 laws, by the way, in the Torah). He doesn't review the 618. He says, "I lay before you this day," you've heard this right? 'Blessings and curses. I call upon heaven and earth

today and reveal to you life and death and I say choose life.' He doesn't say forget the laws. He says there are fundamental choices we make with our lives and all smaller choices flow from them. The moral life is more than the sum total of individual choices. As we cross thresholds, begin relationships, start a new day: at all moments of choice and destiny, we have to make the fundamental choice to choose God, to choose knowing and loving God, to choose to receive God's love and receive God's invitation to be children of God and members of the Triune life through Jesus Christ.

We have to choose to belong to God. God loves us unconditionally without our permission but we will only belong to God if we consent.

The most important thing is not 'what' we do, but who we are... whose we are. The Anglican tradition (remember, as American Episcopalians our theological roots and tradition is Anglican) teaches that the moral life begins with the fundamental moral choice to accept God as our creator and Christ as our Lord. In baptism we say 'yes' to the life of the Spirit, the second birth, that God offers to all.

I wish you could all come up here to stand in this the pulpit. In fact, please pass through this pulpit at some time before you go to coffee hour today because as you stand here, you will look at the Word of God on this podium and then when you look up, you will see the cross lit and rising from the altar, and lastly, the font in blue, holding the water from which we rise with Christ into eternal life, in this world and the next. I have never stood at a pulpit that allows this perfect straight line, from Word to Altar to Font.

Your architecture in this church, from this place I am standing, is a catechism! And, it is a perfect path of Anglican moral theology and practice. I invite every one of you to come and stand and see the whole story right here. There are no speed limits in this line of objects, no minor rules or moral laws. There is only a path from the Word to the Eucharist and through the Font, no one of the three places more important but all a trinity of touchstones and symbols that lay out our path toward God. Word, water, bread, wine, oil....These are the signs of our destiny and the building blocks of our identity.

How do you make a moral choice as an Episcopalian? Follow your identity as I am looking at it from this pulpit. But this path of word, altar and font in between you and any moral choice. When you immerse yourself in baptismal waters, feed yourself on the Word and Sacrament, then you have the power and truth to discern truth.

Before you make any choice, you first choose life: you remember who you are, you walk with Christ. Remember the lines in Scripture, at the baptism of Jesus, when God said, "This is my son in whom I am well pleased." That sentence sets the identity of Christ, not just as the son of a carpenter, but as a child of God. God says that to all in the waters of our baptism. The moral life is an extension of who we are, or a deviation of it. But the moral life is not the goal, it is the fruit of a life lost in Christ, finding its way in the world by word, altar and font.

Next time you're deciding whether to cheat on your taxes or speed or just ignore writing a thank you note to someone that you know would love it...don't do what we did for 1000 years, which is try to figure out what's right and wrong as if life were a gameshow. Remember instead who you are. Remember whose you are. You are a child of God in whom God is well pleased. You have the light of Christ. So ask God for guidance in moral choices. By the way, the teachings of church, moral and spiritual, contain some pretty wise suggestions, concerning what things or choices have pulled us away from God or drawn us closer to God. But remember you were not created to follow rules, you were created to live abundant life in the waters of baptism that flood the world through the followers of Christ.

Abundant life is your destiny, not moral rectitude. Too often that's why we get the Pharisees in our scriptures who continue to remind us what it looks like to follow the law as an end in itself. Those conversations with Jesus are never easy because Jesus says, "I did not come, remember, to change a single word of the law." The laws do not go away Episcopalian, but our belief is that it is your identity and destiny with Christ that you reflect on first, not fear of failing a moral challenge.

As you enter Lent, as we enter Lent together, and we're getting so close to Ash Wednesday when Rev. Robin will stand in front of you and invite you as we have for centuries to observe together a holy Lent, do not do at that moment what people do when they are afraid of intimacy with God: do not reduce God's call to us to live in love with a moral list of do's and don'ts.

To observe a holy Lent means to look at what Christ has done in the world and say, "That is who I am. How will I pay my taxes in light of who I am? How will I treat the person I hate in light of who I am? How will I stop crucifying my own body when I look in the mirror because of who I am?" Trust me, as an Episcopalian, you believe strongly in the rules that give us the freedom to be with Christ but do not make an idol of the ladder that leads you to God because it will be a ladder to the grave. When we try to get to God on our moral choices we will fail and fall. When we accept God coming to us in Christ and say "yes" to that identity, we have both freedom and power to find the moral way.

The one who said, "Come and follow me," "taste and see," "drop your nets..." this is the loving, inviting, forgiving and redeeming voice of Christ that whispers to us at the beginning of Lent. Don't worry so much about the rules, focus instead on who and whose you are, and trust that the fruit of our identity in Christ will be an orchard of the moral life. Amen.