

A sermon given on Sunday, February 20, 2011
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates

Getting Right Down To It

“Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so...”

I wonder, when did you last hear that song? I wonder, before this morning, when did you last sing it? I wonder, when did you last wish to know it, to really know it to be true. “Jesus loves me, this I know.” When you get right down to it, says the song, it’s that simple.

I’ve been talking with a relatively new Christian lately. She grew up with no religious traditions whatsoever. Yet she was drawn to faith. Drawn to wonder. Drawn to believe. Across the continents she has explored world religions. Across the years she has watched and listened and read. Why do religious people do what they do? What does the Bible say? And she has come to believe. And she has come to find strength in her own faith. And if you ask her what’s important about it all, in the end, she will recite for you – two verses from Ecclesiastes [3:13 & 12:13] “Eat, drink, and rejoice. Fear God, and follow his commandments.” When you get right down to it, she says, it’s that simple.

I’ve been thinking this week about Robert Fulghum. He’s the guy who, years ago, wrote a book called *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Remember? It was #1 on the best seller list for about a bazillion weeks. All you really need to know about the book you learned in the title. Kindergarten’s rules, said Fulghum, are life’s rules: Share everything. Play fair. Don’t hit. Put things back where you found them. Don’t take things that aren’t yours. Say you’re sorry when you hurt someone. Flush. Wash your hands. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. And so on.

I thought about the book when I read today’s Old Testament lesson. Sure enough, there are plenty of parallels between the Holiness Code of Leviticus, and the Kindergarten Code of Fulghum. Leave some of your harvest in the fields for others, says Leviticus; share everything, says Fulghum. You shall not steal or deal falsely, says Leviticus; don’t take what’s not yours, says Fulghum. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also, Jesus chimes in; just don’t hit people! says Fulghum.

Now, mind you, the Scriptures purport to tell us how to be holy. Fulghum just said it was about getting along with others. But maybe they are not so very different. When asked to summarize all the teachings of his religion, the great Rabbi Hillel is reputed to have replied: “Love God and love your neighbor. All the rest is commentary.” Love your neighbor. When you get right down to it, perhaps, it’s that simple.

Do you know any perfectionists? Or are you one yourself? Does your compulsion to get it absolutely right keep you from enjoying even the smallest

sense of satisfaction? Do you experience it to be true that, as they say, “the perfect is the enemy of the good?” If so, then I’m thinking you may have had a hard time with today’s Gospel lesson. [Mt 5:38-48] First, Jesus makes every rule harder by taking it to the extreme. One cheek is not enough, let ‘em whack both. One mile is not enough, go two. Loving your neighbor’s not enough, love your enemy. And then he wraps it all up by saying, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Jeepers. He expects a lot.

The thing is, that word “perfect” in the Bible – the Greek is *‘teleios’*. And it doesn’t really mean ‘flawless’ or ‘faultless’. It means ‘whole’ or ‘complete’ or ‘perfectly integrated.’ It’s like that definition of a saint, that says a saint is someone whose outsides and insides match. So, ‘Be perfect’ means ‘Be genuine, be authentic.’ Be who you say you are. And if you say you are a loving person (which I hope you do!), well then I guess you can’t just love the nice folks who are easy to love. You have to love the spiteful ones, too. Be completely who you say you are – be genuine. When you get right down to it, says Jesus, it’s that simple.

Though it must be acknowledged immediately: “simple” and “easy” are not the same.

Eat, drink, and rejoice.

Fear God and follow God’s commandments.

Love your neighbor.

Be authentic.

There are some basic messages for us today. Which is good, because sometimes, we just need to hear the basics.

When you and I are really spent, and don’t reckon we have the physical or emotional stamina to carry on, all we really want to hear are the basic words of Jesus: *Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-burdened, and I will give you rest.* [Mt 11:28]

When you and I are sorrowing, grieving when life brings yet another word which is just unspeakably sad, in our own lives or those of those we love, all we really want to hear are the basic words of St. Paul: *Nothing, nothing, nothing will ever separate us from the love of God in Christ.* [Romans 8:38-39]

When you or I have struck out, fallen down, messed up – all we really want to hear are the basic words of the song, *Yes, Jesus loves me; yes, Jesus loves me; yes, Jesus loves me, ... the Bible tells me so.*

Jesus does love me, and Jesus loves you. And because he loves us, he hopes for nothing less from us in return than that we love one another.

Love God. Love your neighbor. When you get right down to it, that’s the deal.