Worship Resources for February 16th, 2020—Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Narrative Lectionary: What Defiles? Mark 7:1-23 (Psalm 51:1-3, 6-7)

Moses’ final discourse to the people in Deuteronomy 30:15-20 calls upon the wandering Israelites to make a decision: which way will they choose? God has brought them out of slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness, making a new covenant with the people. If the people choose God and God’s ways, they will find abundant blessings in the land that God is giving them. But if they turn away from God, to worship other gods, and do not heed the covenant and the commandments, they will not survive. Much of the Israelite’s survival was tied up in their identity. Following other gods meant conforming to other people’s ways and losing who they were. Choosing God, choosing God’s covenant and commandments, ordinances, and statues is the way they survive.

Psalm 119:1-8 declares that those who follow God and live into God’s ways are the ones who find joy and contentment in life. God gave the commandments to the people to be kept. The psalmist yearns to follow God’s ways wholeheartedly, knowing they will be upright and true before God if they keep them, and they call upon God to not forsake them.

Paul references his simple Gospel message in 1 Corinthians 3:1-9, comparing it to milk instead of solid food, the beginnings of nourishment. The church in Corinth held several divisions among its members: divisions on spiritual gifts, divisions on who ate at the Lord’s Supper, and divisions over what teachers they followed, like the Greek philosophers around them. Some claimed to follow Apollos, others Paul. Some claimed some spiritual gifts were better than others. Paul states that while he came and planted the seeds of the church and Apollos helped nurture them, it is God who gave the growth. Paul, Apollos, and other teachers serve a common purpose: to do God’s will. It is God whom they should look to, rather than dividing into factions and creating jealousy among them.

Jesus continues to teach the disciples in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:21-37. This section has several “You have heard it said … but I say to you …” sayings of Jesus. Jesus expands the commandments and teachings to not be simply read, but to be lived out, to live into God’s ways with intention. “Do not murder,” is not simply a commandment to not kill, but it is to not hold a grudge that would lead to violence, to find ways of reconciliation wherever possible. “You shall not commit adultery” isn’t simply about not sleeping with someone else while married, but it is about living with intentionality toward your spouse or partner, to be devoted to them. Jesus’ teaching on divorce is harsh, but it shows God’s intentions: that marriage is not something to be entered into lightly, and the pain of divorce is not what God wants for us. While divorce still happens, and is sometimes necessary, what has led up to that—abuse, neglect, or unfaithfulness—none of those things are God’s intentions for us, either. Jesus’ teachings about vows and oaths is to live an honest life, where your yes means yes, your no means no, because one values honesty and truth, and lives it out.

The Narrative Lectionary asks the question “What Defiles?” in Mark 7:1-23. Jesus was teaching nearby some Pharisees and scribes, and they questioned Jesus as to why his disciples didn’t ritually wash their hands as they did. Jesus calls them hypocrites, claiming they are holding to human tradition above God’s commandments. He calls the religious leaders out on their keeping some commandments and not others and speaks about what truly defiles—not what goes in by eating or drinking, but by what comes out. Purification rituals are meaningless if one doesn’t work to purify their life. Jesus speaks about what is on the inside, what is in our hearts—if that is impure, then we live impure lives. If we have evil intentions, it doesn’t matter what rituals or traditions we follow.

Psalm 51:1-3, 6-7 is a song of prayer for forgiveness, healing, and purification. The psalmist (historically attributed to David) recognizes that they have sinned, and call upon God to cleanse them of their sin. They desire to be purified from within, to have God’s truth within them and to have God’s wisdom in their heart.

A word of caution: sometimes as Christians, we can interpret the commandments and laws and ordinances as a list of rules and that the Jewish teachers were only concerned with following the rules. This is not true. It is not only sloppy exegesis, but also leads us into anti-semitic teaching. The Jewish Annotated New Testament points out in the footnotes to Mark 7:1-23 that not all Jews practiced handwashing. Rather, the intention it seems of Jesus’ teaching in both the Narrative and Revised Common Lectionary is a consistency of our inner hearts and our outward expression of faith. Paul also speaks to the church in Corinth about being consistent toward God in how we live out our faith, seeking God’s will rather than claiming to be better than others. Moses called upon the people to choose—choose God and choose the life that God desires for us, or choose our own ways, to go it alone. God intended for us to be together, and the commandments are a covenant for how we live with one another. The prophets and the Gospel writers lead us into intentional living, seeking God’s intention for our lives instead of our own, to live with consistency from our hearts outward.

Call to Worship (from Proverbs 8:1-4, 33-35)

Does not Wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?

**On the heights, at the crossroads she takes her stand.**

Beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance she cries out,

**To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live.**

Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it.

**Happy is the one who listens to Wisdom, watching and waiting daily.**

For whoever finds Wisdom finds life, and obtains favor from the Lord.

**Come, worship God, seek Wisdom, and follow Jesus our Lord.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of Wisdom, we come before You to confess that we have sought the world’s wisdom over Yours. We have pursued worldly measures of success: possessions, wealth, and notoriety. Call us out from the noise of the world to hear Your voice. Guide us away from the false wisdom of the world and into true wisdom: to seek peace and pursue it, to work for justice and restoration, to love our neighbor as ourselves. Keep us to Your path, where Your voice guides us, and bring us into the true life You have promised us: a life of abundance, of hope, of mercy. In the name of Christ Jesus, who laid down his life for us and lives again, so that we might live abundantly, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

According to the book of Proverbs, Wisdom delights in the human race. God knows we have the capability to improve our lives and our relationships with others. God knows we have the power to forgive, to bring healing, to do the hard work of reconciliation and restoration. Roll up your sleeves. Get ready for the hard work of Christ, because Christ is right beside us in this work, Wisdom like a master worker, rejoicing in us. We can do this, together. You are beloved of God. You are forgiven. You are restored. Go with the Wisdom of God and the grace of Jesus Christ, now and always. Amen.

Prayer

God of Compassion and Mercy, the world is broken. You created a garden and we have decimated the earth. You created us to be in community and we have built walls and caged children. You created us to be whole people and we have hurt one another through our words and actions, but most of all through our silence. God, heal us. Help us to mend one another by speaking truth to power and rising up against injustice. Guide us to Your initial intention: to care for the earth, to care for its creatures, to care for each other with mutual respect and love. Help us to live whole lives, where we live into the commandments and judge ourselves, rather than judging others and lifting up our own piety. Grant us Your mercy, and shower us with Your compassion and steadfast love, so we might find healing in You, and love one another. Amen.