

**The Rev. Carol Duncan**  
**September 1, 2024**  
**The Implanted Word**

Lord of Light and Faith, may my words carry your true meaning to those who listen this morning.  
Amen.

Sometimes the lessons of the lectionary come together on a Sunday to trigger an aha discovery. As I was trying to hold all three readings together simultaneously, I got sort of a tap on my mind. "What?" I asked. "Something here is still true today - something about God's law and something about politics." "OK thanks," I thought back. "I'll try to find it."

In today's Gospel Jesus is confronted by scribes and Pharisees. They are reacting defensively to reports of Jesus' ubiquitous miracles of feeding and healing. They've come from Jerusalem to stop him usurping their authority. They accuse his followers of eating without washing their hands first.

Jesus thinks there are worse things than dirty hands. He accuses the Pharisees of being hypocrites. He quotes Isaiah's words to prove it. Their hearts are far from God. They have replaced the commandments of God with their own invented rules.

Have they? Let's look at the first reading today. Moses commands God's people to add nothing to what Moses commands and to take nothing away. They must watch themselves closely, so they teach down the generations nothing beyond the commandments. Full stop. The scribes and Pharisees are the ones in charge of carrying out Moses' instructions. Washing hands certainly wasn't in the first ten commandments.

Going back to Jesus, he turns to the crowd and tells them not to worry about what kind of food they eat or how they ingest it. What can separate you from the love of God is not eating but intentions and actions. The whole list of evils that Jesus enumerates is covered by the original ten commandments. So, what Jesus does here is Jesus affirm the people's access to and understanding of the law. Listen and understand, he says. God has implanted the law in people. I hadn't understood that Jesus considered the law to be implanted in humans. But of course many, perhaps most, people follow the law of caring for neighbors as they do for themselves.

What Pharisees added was a great mass of oral tradition to regulate a person's life completely. The oral tradition was then passed on as binding regulation. Jesus was proclaiming that Pharisees were adulterating God's law and running the political and social governance of the country by it.

Let's look at the Epistle of James to see how it contributes to our understanding of God's law. James introduces us to a warm and loving God whom he calls the Father of Lights which makes sense when you remember that Jesus is named Light from Light in the Nicene Creed.

From this God, according to James, comes every perfect gift, all that is real and wonderful in life. James says God decided to give birth to us Christians by the word of truth, meaning through Jesus. We must welcome with meekness this word implanted in our souls.

I am thrilled to be coached by Jesus and by James to trust that the true word God is implanted within me. James says that implanted word can resist wickedness such as the evils cataloged by Jesus. James also says it's not enough to be aware of the implanted word. Our souls will be saved when we persevere in doing and acting on the word.

What does James say the word tells us to do? At its purest, God's law tells us to care for widows and orphans in their distress. Widows and orphans represent all those who are made vulnerable by poverty and by the principalities and powers of this world.

So here is how these three lessons come together for me.

The Pharisees represent the principalities and powers that try to swamp God's word. Pharisees captured and changed the word of God into human rules and power that they controlled.

The same thing is happening today. Christian Nationalists are trying to capture the word of God for their own power. For example, Governor DeSantis has banned many books in Florida's public schools so that children don't learn about their own bodies. Even politicians we admire are guilty of being careless with law and power. Mayor Parker clearing the streets of Kensington of drug users without giving them enough places to go or treatment options was an act of pride and folly. You can probably think of many other examples.

This insight from the three lessons gives us two directions to follow in our day.

First, be thoughtful about who you pick to be a leader in our country. Use Jesus' and James' standard to evaluate the candidates you vote for. Are they caring for the vulnerable or are they abrogating power to themselves? One path toward choosing is to come to the Voter Education table after the service to discover resources to learn about candidates and processes.

Second, follow James' again in your actions. Find ways to care for the most vulnerable members of the community. These are consistently widows and orphans, women and children. In Philadelphia this includes school children, especially those in public schools. As your Deacon, I urge us all to

volunteer with the community organizations supported by St. Martin's through Community Engagement. You can find out about these on our website.

To confirm these actions in our minds, will you please join me in praying again today's collect. Find it in your service leaflet. It paraphrases James' hopes for us. Carry these hopes to the Communion table and then into the world. For me this collect captures my aha feeling of understanding God's dream for our lives. Let us pray it together:

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: Graft in our hearts the love of your Name; increase in us true religion; nourish us with all goodness; and bring forth in us the fruit of good works; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.