

Trinity Church
August 30, 2009

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
RCL, Year B, Proper 17

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*Lord, who may dwell in your tabernacle?
Who may abide upon your holy hill?
Whoever leads a blameless life
and does what is good.
Who speaks the truth from his heart.
Whoever does these things
shall never be overthrown.*

I tried to park in the lot in front of the York Road Giant this weekend: packed with cars and Moms and kids, home from the last of summer's freedoms, tanned, limber, dragging out baskets of food and all kinds of school supplies to fill backpacks for tomorrow morning, when fall officially begins — the opening of school. There was bustling excitement, energy in the air, but no place to park. I had to circle the airport twice before I found a space in which to land.

My family's home was practically across the street from the grade school I attended — named after President Grant. All the grade schools were named after Presidents. A week or so before school began, Grant School, somnolent through the heat of summer, awoke. Windows thrown open, janitors scrubbing and waxing, teachers doing up bulletin boards and catching up with colleagues. The flag drooping again on the schoolyard pole, awaiting a fall breeze. And there I was with a few of my cronies, asking the Principal if she needed any help. So we lugged textbooks and art supplies and helped set up the music room, and put new books in the library. Every day the excitement grew as I told my parents the news: I found a great new book all about horses in the library; there's a new piano in the kindergarten room — I played "Jesus loves Me" on it — I met my teacher, he's from Minnesota and promises to tell us all about Paul Bunyan and Babe the Blue Ox; my desk is going to be by the window. I was psyched! Ready to go! School is great.

I felt that old grade school spirit on Friday here, as new parents and their children arrived at the Children's Center to see their first school, all neat and clean and sparkling — ready for learning and fun. And a few tears of anxiety about it all, from parents and students alike.

This spirit that I remember feeling must be something like how God's people felt when they were admonished to receive and keep the law. "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people! What other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? Make them known to your children and your children's children." We are drawn to explore and learn in the hope that our experiences will build character, and that an informed heart will draw us closer to God and help us live wise and discerning lives.

This spirit must also have enflamed the hearts of the disciples as they went about with Jesus. What signs he gives that reveal how close God's love is to us! What compassion that speaks healing and forgiveness unto broken lives! What faith and trust in God he has that he embraces lepers and eats with sinners knowing no defilement! He leads a blameless life, and does what is right; he speaks the truth from his heart. He is God's tabernacle. He abides in splendor on God's holy hill. My heart is full of hope and anticipation when I follow him. With him, I, too, do the love and mercy of God in my life. He lives in me and I in him.

But then *they* show up! “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?” It’s like saying, “No, we don’t need your help getting ready for school. Come back when school opens, and not a day before.” It’s like saying, “Just drop your kid off at TECC and go away. We’ll look after him. Stop crying! And next time get your tuition check in in advance.” It’s like saying, “It says in the Prayer Book that there should be a confession of sin at every service. You left it out today. Should I call the Bishop?” Isaiah prophesied rightly: “This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me.”

It is so easy, though, to slip into idolatry and worship some law or custom in place of the God whose Spirit enlivens law and custom with love and mercy and life. When my mother would ask me to wash my hands before dinner, and I was in a smart-alecky mood, I would say, “Jesus says in Mark 7 that you don’t have to wash your hands before supper.” And my mother would fall for it every time. “I don’t care what Jesus said. If you want supper, you’d better wash up!” And I would say, astonished, “What!? You don’t care what Jesus said?” And then I would run for the wash room. Gottcha!

But we are all like that! Either out of fear, or greed, or envy, or lust — all those things within us that, when they come out, tempt us to use rules, customs, loopholes, deception, manipulation to get what we want or to protect ourselves. We forget to use those same rules and traditions as instruments of peace and love. And then we know that we have forgotten Christ, who when we followed him, filled us with such hope. He made all laws and customs shine with newness of life, with healing and grace and splendor.

It’s backpack day once again. Thousands of kids are stuffing books and supplies and snacks and forbidden cell phones, and gosh knows what, into their book bags, ready for tomorrow. But the heart and soul of all truth and learning is here today, Jesus Christ, our Lord. We are so thrilled to be his disciples. When we follow him we discover the most astonishing things, such divine splendor at the heart of all learning. Such love in the signs of his presence. Compassion that speaks healing into broken lives. Such faith and trust in God that creativity springs forth, we risk what is new, we stretch ourselves into goodness. We enliven laws and customs with grace. We are psyched! Ready to go!

That’s the blessing that I want to give to each of us from God today. The blessing of his Son Jesus. The blessing of being a disciple of Christ. The blessing of following Christ, through learning into all truth. May you come to life in his truth and love, and make all that you learn shine with goodness and love, since that is what flows from your heart.

*Who is it that abides in God’s tabernacle?
You, when you lead a blameless life.
You, when you do what is good.
You, when you speak the truth from your heart.
Whoever does these things shall never be overthrown.
Amen.*