

Lectionary 22 + September 2, 2018

Some of you have heard speak about a “Rule of Life.” Every Christian, I believe, might benefit from a personal rule of life. Now, by “rule” I do not mean a rigid code of conduct. I mean rule in the sense of a way. A way of life. You may call it living by core values. And for us, as followers of Jesus, such a rule of life reflects the way of Jesus.

We already share a common rule with the promises we make at baptism to live in Christian community, worship every Sunday, serve all people, strive for justice and peace, and tell others the good news of God’s love.

THIs is our common rule. How each of us live out these things varies - a lot. Your mode of serving Christ depends upon the places God has called you to work and live and play and your ode of serving Christ is shaped by your unique gifts and passions.

What is your rule of life? How do you navigate your days when you go to school, go to work, participate in PTA or scouts, play soccer with your friends, change diapers, wash dishes, pay bills, honor strangers, live among your neighbors?

I’ve been inspired by the witness of many folks who have practiced a rule of life:

- I have a friend whose personal rule is to look for Jesus in every person she encounters, especially those who get under her skin.
- I remember with fondness Joanne and Norm, mentors from my Internship congregation. Their rule of life was Micah 6:8 – to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.
- More than once, you’ve heard me make reference to my friend John. Is rule is to “Never resist a generous impulse.”
- St. Francis of old had a kind of rule of life: “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.”

A great resource for discerning a personal way or rule is the Book of James. Over the next weeks, our second lesson will come from James. It is a beautiful piece of early Christian wisdom. James resists ethereal matters and goes straight to the practical everyday business of Christian behavior. Today’s lesson is a great example: “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God’s righteousness.”

Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.

That’s not a bad rule of life and it’s not a bad place to begin to think about a rule of life.

In the *Message* version of the Bible, Eugene Peterson words the passage this way: “Lead with your ears, follow up with your tongue, and let anger straggle along in the rear.”

Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.

To practice such a rule witnesses to the way of Jesus and serves as a kind of counter witness to violent speech that permeates society. Such a rule may serve to show a different way, a way that is different than much of the public discourse in our nation – speech inflamed with anger, intolerance, and a refusal and inability to listen. Waging violence with our words isn't new. Not by a long shot, but it seems pronounced these days. We're a nation polarized and our public speech often deepens the polarities.

Hate groups seem to be taking up more space in the public square. Social media is filled with vitriol. Have you noticed how facebook becomes a forum for people to lob grenades at one another? Why, last week, I was privy to some facebook drama – one of my facebook friends was un-friended by another because they had a fight online. Now, it seems okay for public leaders to spout nasty comments about folks with whom they disagree.

A linguistics scholar named Deborah Tanner wrote a book in 1998 titled "The Argument Culture.," Her thesis was that we like to argue and public discourse in our nation's press, politics, law, and education leads to polarization because the primary way we used words is to use them to fight. We like to fight. In fact, she noted how public causes are often framed in the language of fight: the war on drugs, the war on poverty, the battle of the sexes, turf battle. The art of respectful debate has dissolved into viciousness, dehumanizing those with whom we disagree.

In his life and in his death, Senator John McCain endeavored to call the public to a higher ground. At his funeral yesterday, two of the eulogists were people who defeated him in elections: former President Bush who once defeated him in the Republican primaries and former President Obama who defeated McCain for the presidency in 2008. His opponents were among his friends. Something like this serves as a hopeful sign that maybe we can rise above polarization, angry speech and embrace civility and respect in working toward the common good.

I wonder if we, as a nation, could take that higher ground.

Can we? I don't know.

What I do know is this - as Christians we are called to take the higher ground by witnessing to the things of Jesus. We are free to show a different way ... a way that is different from a discourse grounded in enmity and violence. To practice a rule such as this doesn't come about by our cleverness or strength but through the resilient power of God's Spirit. A rule of life such as this comes from the heart.

Isn't that what Jesus is getting at in the Gospel lesson today? It's what comes from within that defiles including hurtful speech. It's a sign of hearts far from God.

Rules in and of themselves do not insure lives filled with love. It is the heart that directs our way, our rule of life.

When we were in Ireland last June, we took Patrick Meagher's advice and stopped by a place called Corymeela. It's a place dedicated to the holy work of reconciliation and peace. We enjoyed a tour of the place including a very interesting space called the Croi' – it's the Irish word for "heart." In fact the space, used for prayer, is shaped like a heart and is described a place to go and take time to listen to the true heartbeat and be inspired and united with others in a society where there are so many destructive and violent beats. It's a kind of open place and the prayer space is fashioned for people to gather in a circle. Britt and I were touched by this community and especially the Croi.'

Just so, we are given the gift of a Croi' so that our individual hearts may be shaped to be people of Jesus committed listening and gentle speech. The Croi' is the Sunday assembly where God calls us back to the heart of things around the bath, the word, and the table. By bringing us back to this Croi' God brings us back to God's very own heart.

I once visited a congregation in California that had a large placard you could see on the wall when leaving the worship space. In big and bold letters it read: "Be Doers of the Word, not hearers only." You couldn't miss it. Now, I was rather appreciative of the sentiment. It's biblical. It's straight from the book of James, but in that context I didn't find it especially helpful. It felt like we were being shouted at. I rather prefer "Go in peace, serve the Lord." That dismissal comes on the heels of being blessed by God whose face shines on us and who blesses us and gives us peace.

For you see, it is God who is at work shaping our hearts by calling us to God's own heart – the holy Croi' – and sends us out forgiven, healed, made whole, and energized for service.

Amen.