

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 24th Sunday after Pentecost, November 4, 2018.

A few days ago, the Church celebrated All Saints Day. It's a time to recognize those individuals who have led exemplary lives and thus serve as models for us.

Well, what is exemplary about these folks? For one thing, courage, doing the right thing in really tough situations.

Which leads to another question: how does one develop such courage? Is there a formula, a recipe, a set of laws to obey? Yes, there is such. This set of laws has a name: the Commandments.

These expectations are remarkably clear. When we fail to meet them, it is not because we don't understand what is expected. We cannot claim confusion. Our disobedience carries an adjective: willful. We choose. We own the behavior. We are responsible.

The same is true when we behave. Our obedience is willful. We own that too. And when we meet God's expectations, we feel good, even if there is a cost, a sacrifice, of some sort.

Those to whom we give the title of Saint have done a particularly impressive job of obedience. And one of the ways they have earned the title is by focusing on the basics.

For many of us, such focus is a challenge. We tend to make things more complicated than they need to be. In an effort to achieve precision, we fine-tune to a fault. Or, as our Collect this morning suggests, we "stumble" over the details.

Well, our lessons this morning are about the basics, not the details. They remind us that, as important as details can be in terms of implementation, they are not a substitute for that which is to be implemented.

Here are this morning's examples of a basic.

From Deuteronomy (**Deuteronomy 6:1-9**): “Hear therefore, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.”

From Hebrews (**Hebrews 9:11-14**): “... how much more will the blood of Christ ... purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God!”

And from Mark (**Mark 12:28-34**), and earlier from Deuteronomy: “... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. ... And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

To underscore the importance of these “basics,” the scribe in the Mark passage observes, “... this is much more important than burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Well, if we can manage to stay focused on the basics, the details become a help rather than a distraction. Psalm 119 (**Psalm 119:1-8**) describes it this way: “Happy are they who observe his decrees, and seek him with all their hearts!”

Okay, let us agree that we are to love God and love neighbor. This is what God wants. Indeed this is what God commands. And let us also agree that we want to obey this command. It’s what we want as well.

But, the fact of the matter is that, despite what we want, we can and do fall short some of the time. It is simply who we are. We are willful in obedience, but also in disobedience. We’re not proud of the second part of this reality, but we recognize it and experiment with all sorts of ways of justifying behavior. To ourselves, not to God.

Sometimes we even blame God. After all, God presumably could have created us with the capacity only to behave. Clearly He did not. So it’s not our fault. It is God’s fault.

A more reasonable response, of course, is to recognize that God created us with a capacity both to behave and misbehave. We call it “free will.” Choosing obedience when we could choose disobedience is something we are proud of. It’s the right use of our freedom, a choice that pleases both God and us.

And this is the response that most of us make most of the time. We know we have a choice. And we know that when we choose to obey, we feel much better than if we don't. But even when we know better, even when we know that we will feel better, sometimes we will act in a contrary manner.

Let's admit it. We have a selfish streak, and that's a challenge all of the time and a problem some of the time. So, what do we do? How do we get ourselves out of this mess?

Well, we don't, at least by ourselves. God participates in a huge way. That's our faith. That's our conviction.

God steps in. God rescues. God provides an antidote to our selfishness. That antidote for you and me is Jesus, God Incarnate, God in human flesh, selflessness embodied.

God recognizes that His expectation of obedience might be a tad too high. So, without modifying the gift or the expectation, God says "Look it, I forgive you, and, with this forgiveness, I trust that your record of obedience will improve."

At this point, you and I have another choice to make. Do we accept God's forgiveness and move ahead in thanksgiving and confidence? Or do we continue to struggle with our disobedience? The choice is clear, isn't it?

Now, does acceptance of God's gift in Christ guarantee an absence of disobedience? Well, we know that answer. No. But, does our acceptance of God's gift in Christ improve our record of obedience? We would like to think so.

Indeed, we gather regularly to say, "Thank You, Lord, for caring enough about us to give us yet another chance to lead the kind of life that we know we ought to lead. We know the basics, Lord. But we also know that we continue to fall short. So, please, don't leave us. Stay by us. Stay with us. Stay for us.

You think we're worth saving. That promise keeps us going. The truth is that your basics run deeper than ours. And for that reality, that incredible gift, we give you thanks.

From today's Collect: "Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service."

So, let's hear it for the capital S Saints and for all the Saints, capital and otherwise. Most of us, if we qualify at all, are part of the "otherwise." But that's okay, because the "otherwise" are precisely the ones Jesus came to save. We're the ones who need the Intervention, and, thanks be to God, the Intervention came and continues for ever and ever. Our response now and always is to give thanks and to try harder.

Amen.