

The Rev. Anne Smith

Sermon preached July 3, 2011 (Independence Day, transferred)

St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church

Texts: Deuteronomy 10:17-21, Hebrews 11:8-16, Matthew 5:43-48, Psalm 145:1-9

---

A week ago I was in Boston for the first time. We had a great time touring around, but there's plenty left to see if we ever go back. One thing we did do was walk along the Freedom Trail. The "trail" part of this is literally a red line painted on the pavement to show you where to walk. The Trail goes from Boston Common to Bunker Hill, pointing out landmarks of great historical significance along the way. Some relate to the Abolitionist Movement, but most pertain to the American Revolution. There's the site of the first public school in America, which was attended by Declaration of Independence signers Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Adams, Robert Treat Paine, and John Hancock. There's Park Street Church, where William Lloyd Garrison delivered his first major public anti-slavery speech, on Independence Day in 1829. The Old South Meeting House, where Samuel Adams gave the signal for the Sons of Liberty to begin the Boston Tea Party. The Old North Church, where two lanterns were displayed in the steeple, the tallest in Boston, to give Paul Revere's message to the Patriots that the King's Army was advancing along the Charles River. And among many other sights, there was the Old State House.

The Old State House is dwarfed by the buildings that surround it now, but it once was among the most impressive buildings in Boston. As the literature says, this is the place where "many of the basic concepts underlying American government were first voiced." It's where Samuel Adams "urged resistance to taxation imposed without representation" and where James Otis "railed against unwarranted search and seizure." It was the seat of the British government in Massachusetts before the American Revolution, and was the first capitol building of Massachusetts after the Revolution. The Boston Massacre occurred just outside its walls. And there's a balcony at one end of the building that is the balcony from which the Declaration of Independence was first read in Massachusetts.

I was very interested in this balcony. It didn't look like much. It didn't look to me like more than three people could have crowded onto it. It's not terribly high up—it's just on the second story of a three-story building. But it represented the seat of political authority, and a crowd of thousands might have gathered in front of it to hear the words of the Declaration that changed their national life so radically. I stood under that balcony with other tourists on Tuesday morning as Bostonians sped by in all directions, many headed for work. I wondered what it would have felt like to hear those words read. It would have been electric, I think. It would have turned people's worlds upside down.

Today in church our liturgy is in part a celebration of that Declaration. Our prayers and scriptures and music were chosen to help us mark the importance of Independence Day in our national life.

But even though the lectionary specifies the readings we heard this morning as a part of our Independence Day liturgies, I confess I am not sure why the gospel reading for today was considered particularly suited to the occasion.

Still I am interested in the similarity between the gospel story and the scene I learned about last Tuesday, the reading of the Declaration from the balcony of the State House. This gospel is a part of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is seated above a vast crowd on the side of a mountain. He speaks with authority—divine authority. And he offers a revolutionary understanding of God. At the Old State House in Boston men were concerned with the laws of the country, and in the sermon on the mount, Jesus is concerned with the laws of God: Torah.

Now I have to stress that while we generally translate the word for Torah as “law,” and Torah does guide behavior and demand action, we miss the meaning of the word “Torah” when we ONLY think of our English word “law.” The first thing to remember is that Torah is a gift of love. Its purpose is not primarily to stop people from doing bad things, but rather to show people how to do good by following God’s way. God gave Torah to the people of Israel to fulfill a promise God made to Abraham: God loved Abraham, and so God promised to reveal God’s way to Abraham’s descendents. The people of Israel received that revelation of God’s way, and the Hebrew Bible is the written record of that revelation. It expresses their understanding of how God wanted people to behave toward one another. It showed how to respond to God’s love and blessing.

Now there are plenty of people who thought that Torah actually worked the other way—that if they followed Torah, then God would love and bless them. But God’s love and blessing came first. Jesus reminded people of this over and over—Torah is a gift from God by which God reveals how it is we may walk in God’s way. It is a gift from a loving God.

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is all about Torah. Jesus says that he has not come to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is teaching us how to fulfill Torah, the law. His teaching starts with the beatitudes—blessed are the meek, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the merciful, and so on—and you can see right away that he is concerned with more than just how we act and what we’re not supposed to do. Behavior comes into it, of course, but Jesus is getting at the roots of our behavior, the inner dispositions we cultivate.

At one point, Jesus gives five examples of how this works. It’s not just that we should not murder—it’s that we should seek reconciliation. It’s not just that we shouldn’t commit adultery—it’s that we should honor the commitments and promises we have made to care for each other. It’s not just that we shouldn’t swear falsely—it’s that we should be people of integrity whose speech can be trusted. It’s not just that we shouldn’t retaliate disproportionately against those who do us wrong—it’s that we should do right by everyone. And finally, today’s example: it’s not just that we should love those who love us, but that we should love everyone in imitation of God. Jesus challenges us to take God’s perspective. Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” The last words we hear in this gospel passage today are these: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Now taken out of context, the instruction to be perfect used to really stress me out. I used to think Jesus meant what I meant by perfection—meeting an impossible standard. But Jesus is not saying we can't ever make a mistake. That's not his point at all. When Jesus says "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you," we have to remember that God loves even the enemies of God. God shows mercy to everyone—and we are instructed to be the same.

Jesus reminds his listeners that God loves each person and offers divine blessing to everyone. Every person is beloved, lovable, and worthwhile. This is grace, offered freely to every person, but not everyone has recognized it and responded to it yet. Not everyone is walking in God's way. But we don't get to cultivate an us and them mentality—we actually have to cultivate in ourselves a mentality that says God is gracious to all and a lover of all souls. Whatever it is we don't understand about how God can love those people, and however hard it may be for us to see God's grace at work in their lives or even to want God's grace to be at work in their lives—we are still called to desire just that—that each life would be filled with God's love and know God's blessing.

The tough thing about being perfect as God is perfect—that is, loving everyone equally, showing mercy to everyone—is that God really has an advantage on us. He knows everything. We don't. And we're going to make mistakes, and fall short. So what do we do?

The Apostle Paul gives us this advice: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect." We are to be transformed. We seek transformation so that more and more we can understand God's will, so that more and more we can love as God loves.

And here's where a little thing called faith comes in. Because we're human and limited and don't know everything, we have to have faith. Faith isn't just belief, though it involves believing things. Faith is really more like trust—we have to trust God that when we try to do all this stuff, to show mercy and love others and do God's will, that God will help us. We have to keep God's promises in mind, the way Abraham kept God's promises in mind in that story we heard from Hebrews today in our second lesson. God told Abraham to GO, but he didn't tell him where. Abraham had to do what God asked without knowing everything God knew. It was by faith that Abraham did this.

We too have to walk by faith. We're not necessarily GOING anywhere—this community of faith is trying to hear and do God's will right here in Lodi, in this building. But like Abraham we want to do what God asks of us—because God love us, and we love God—and we have to hear God's voice without knowing exactly what the journey will be like. We like Abraham trust that God will be with us. And we, like Abraham, know that the ultimate destination, whatever we do on this earth, is life with God. Because of God's promises we can walk into the unknown today. We can begin to keep Torah now, to be transformed, to do that which pleases God. Maybe it will turn out world upside down, too.