

Proper 17B
Mark 9:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
29 August 2009
Christ Church

*This people honors me with their lips;
but their hearts are far from me.*

Like most suburban families, when we first met our next-door neighbors, we were very conscious of keeping good boundaries with them. Not long after they moved in, our neighbors decided to install a pool in their back yard. Of course, that meant they needed to build a privacy fence. Their new fence changed the prospect – the vista—in our back yard.

I admit that I was a little irritated by this change in our landscape. Until then, our back yard, which was enclosed by a simple white picket fence, had a wonderful feel of openness. Once the privacy fence went up we felt a little boxed in. And, the marginal space between their fence and ours was just room

enough for all manner of weeds to grow there. This posed a challenge to lawn maintenance.

As with most neighbors in suburbia, we would, from time to time, have to negotiate property line issues: a dispute about cutting down a tree whose limbs grew over their hot tub, or the time my boys played hard ball in the back yard, and John lobbed one over the fence into the middle of a cluster of sun bathers. I guess we can be pretty troublesome neighbors.

Heretofore, our relationship with our neighbors has been cordial, but not intimate. Our cats are better at socializing than we have been. Mizzie, our now deceased rotund tabby, was fond of lounging with them beside their hot tub; and Max, our newly adopted cat from my mother's estate, has enjoyed many a repast with them. We haven't done nearly as well as our pets.

That is – until this week. Last Sunday evening when David stepped out to take our dog for a walk, a group of people were gathered in our neighbor's driveway, holding each other

and weeping. David asked if he could help. He found out that our neighbors' youngest son had been killed hours earlier in an accident on I-75. He was 23 years old.

In a matter of seconds, a relationship that had been based on property line negotiations, privacy fence discussions, and concerns about wayward tree limbs was changed forever. Death had brought us together as true neighbors – God's children sharing a common journey.

None of the things that previously defined our relationship seemed to make any difference at all. When tragedy hits, rules and regulations about land holdings seem so trivial.

I thought of this when reading about Jesus' angst at the Pharisees and Scribes who take him to task for violating ritual cleansing laws in today's Gospel. Jesus strenuously drives home a point to these Temple leaders of Israel – who were, if you stop to think about it, His priests. And Jesus is not pleased with his clergy's attitude.

When the priests challenge him for neglecting to follow the ritual cleansing that the Law prescribes, Jesus doesn't hold back his frustration and anger. It is as though he wants them to see the futility of keeping score. They are totally missing the point.

But, these leaders can't see it. They've devoted their lives to clean living – following the rules, getting it right and being right – at least in the things that are observable: the externals. And, because they are so adept at playing by the rules, they hold others to the same standard, judging others harshly when they fail to adhere to the letter of the law.

Jesus, himself a devout Jew, really “takes them to school.” In this reading, he is not at all the gentle Jesus we think of in the New Testament. He calls them hypocrites. And he quotes Hebraic Law right back at them: “...This people honors me with their lips but their hearts are far from me ... you abandon the Law of God.”

Jesus doesn't stop there. He accuses them of keeping outward piety by behaving scandalously from within. Murder, fornication, treachery, the list goes on and on. Perhaps we are a little shocked to hear Jesus get this riled up. But, these are the crème de la crème of Israel's spiritual leaders, for heavens sake – and they are totally missing the point of the Law.

Jesus desperately wants them to see that the Law isn't an exacting principle with which to beat people over the head. The Law isn't a to-do list that guarantees rewards for good behavior. The Law is really about LOVE! The Law is a guiding principle whose end is to bring people together in love and care for one another. If the Law isn't doing that, then it should be amended.

Now, to back up a little – in reading this polemic of Jesus' confrontation with the Temple Leaders, we must be careful not to assume that Jesus disregards his religious tradition – that Jesus is a Christian and that the Jews have it all wrong. On the contrary, Jesus is a devout Jew who deeply loves these

leaders and wants them to learn to hang on to what is real and what brings life. He wants them to get it – he wants them to do right by their people – to be the people that God intends them to be – not a bunch of arrogant bureaucrats who take names and keep score – and place enormous burdens on the people.

The intensity of Jesus' angst is in direct proportion to the intensity of his love. Ritual and form must never override the Ultimate Reality of God's unconditional love: for the Hebrew people and for all people.

This passage from Mark is as relevant today as it has ever been. God requires our vigilance, not in ritual, not in rule-keeping, but in those behaviors, those choices, those actions in our lives that reflect our intention and our dedication love. We are to love our families, our dear friends, and people we can hardly stand be in the same room with.

How can we do this? Only by God's grace, accessed through prayer, through Scripture, and through our common life of worship and practice.

The laws that govern neighborhood ordinances are useful for demonstrating respect for one another's space and property, but they are not the end point. David and I discovered that this week. The reality of death reminded us of the urgency to love each other every day – as if it were our last. We made our way through the holly hedges and took our neighbors a plate of watermelon and a vase of flowers from our garden – and also our hugs, our affection, and our support.

This is what God requires of all of us: to choose what is really important – to choose what is really real.

That is what the Law is for.