

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 2, 2018
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9
“Picking and Choosing”

If you had to identify the prevailing religion in the United States of America, which religion would it be? Most of us would probably identify Christianity as being the religion of America. While we recognize that there are other religions in our land, we often assume that the majority of the population still adheres to the basic teachings of Christianity and identify themselves with one denomination or another.

Do you know what the prevailing religious view in our country actually is? According to surveys and statistics produced by the Barna group, it's one that you may never have even heard of. It's called “syncretism.”

Syncretism means combining the teachings, doctrines, and worldviews of different religions into a synthesis that is unique to each individual. In other words, it means “picking and choosing” from the differing ideas of various religions to fashion a spirituality that fits one's own unique tastes. For example, syncretism might embrace the Christian view that Jesus is the divine Son of God, but then also agree with the doctrines of Eastern religions that there might be other paths into God's eternal presence. Syncretism might hold that there is a Supreme Being and an afterlife but reject the notion that Satan exists or that there is a place of eternal torment.

Through our Old Testament lesson for today then God proclaims to us a very counter-cultural message: “You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it” (Deuteronomy 4:2a). No editing. No revising. No picking. No choosing allowed! Yahweh declares today that it is only His unenhanced Word that can adequately reveal our deepest problems and needs in order to bring to us true healing, true life, and true peace.

At the time in which this Word of Yahweh was first spoken Israel was about to enter the Promised Land. The Israelites would be faced with ongoing temptations to adopt and adapt some of the religious doctrines, worldviews, and practices of their pagan neighbors. Many of these practices were detestable to Yahweh and lethal to the souls of His people, even if they held a perverse appeal to fallen human nature. For example, in Canaanite religious practice there were temple prostitutes, both male and female, that were enticing to the Israelites. Moreover, there were not a few who practiced witchcraft, soothsaying, and fortune-telling. And then there were also those who were totaling given over to materialism. Yahweh however wanted His redeemed people to remain spiritually alive connected only to Him as the one Lord and giver of life. In fact, He even called His people to be a beacon, a light, to those nations that surrounded them. In today's text Yahweh says, “Keep them (the commandments) and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as Yahweh our God is to us,

whenever we call upon Him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and just decrees so righteous as all this Law that I set before you today?" (Deuteronomy 6:6-8).

And lest we begin to become too smug, we too are seduced and tempted by syncretism. Sometimes it is painfully obvious. Sexual intercourse outside of the estate of marriage. Consultation with horoscopes, palm readers, psychics. Materialism. Some of you gathered here this morning have engaged in those practices. And as uncomfortable as it may be the Lord makes it clear to us: "Turn from these things! Repent!" If an idea or a practice does not flow from the only true God and His life-giving Word, then it comes from the ruler of this age, from Satan, the father of lies, whose only desire is to destroy and kill.

But our picking and choosing can at times be much subtler and therefore much more dangerous. For instance, ask yourself "Are there certain parts of God's Word that I simply pass over or ignore because they're difficult or unenjoyable or they make me feel bad about myself?" Or what about this? "Go and make disciples of all nations" including your friends and family and coworkers. Or: "If you have two tunics or extra food share with those who have none" (Luke 3:11). These commandments, of course, come from God's holy Word and God means what He says.

Are there perhaps sections of God's Word that we would like to add? Perhaps something like: "Blessed are those who at least try to be as nice as they can to their neighbors and don't do anything outrageously bad, for they shall be glorified in heaven." Or try this one on for size: "God so loves the world that He favorably looks upon all people who are trying to be good, so that no one will perish and none of us will have to feel discomfort by trying to share our faith."

These false views, no less than the more obvious ones mentioned earlier, come from Satan, the father of lies. Uninterrupted by God-given repentance, they lead to spiritual, eternal death for ourselves and for a world that is full of people who need to hear God's unedited, unfiltered message of free and full salvation through faith in Jesus Christ alone.

In spite of our shameful desire to redact God's Word to fit our deepest sinful desires, God refuses to edit, retract, or diminish the covenant promises that He made to us at the baptismal font. He has picked you. He has chosen you! He remains our God just as surely as He remained the God of wayward Israel. He continues to claim us as His dear sons and daughters for the sake of Jesus Christ, who willingly handed over His life to secure our redemption. He still promises to completely forgive all who turn to Him in repentance and faith (Is 55:7). He still reserves a place for us in heaven (John 14:1-4). He still pledges to remake us and reshape us into His holy people through His powerful, sanctifying Word (Ephesians 2:10).

So we find ourselves in our day at a transitional point similar to Israel in our text. Whatever unfaithfulness has happened in the past is over and gone because it has been punished and atoned for by the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord. A bright and exciting future as God's chosen, missionary people awaits us under God's forgiving and empowering Word. The key and unsettling question is, "Do we truly want what God offers?"

Remember that He offer only “package deals” - total forgiveness and transformation, new life, in a new heaven and new earth in new purified, sanctified bodies. There is no picking and choosing. God’s Word presents this as a whole package.

And you are in the right place to receive the whole package that God offers. God proclaims His entire unedited Word to you here in this place. He calls you to hear and believe His Word so that you may live.

You see, the Lord loves us too much to minimize or tone down His guilt-producing Word of Law and condemnations for our syncretizing tendencies. Be thankful for that. God wants to warn us about self-reliance, apathy, and worldliness which leads to destruction. He wants us to be exclusively His own, He wants us to call upon Him for help, deliverance and guidance.

No, He will not minimize His Law, but He will not do it because He wants to make us feel bad but so that we will despair of ourselves and turn wholly to Him with the result that He will forgive us for the sake of the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus. You see while He will not minimize His Law He will also not minimize His Word of Gospel either. In fact, the Law serves the Gospel. It sets the stage for the proclamation of the complete and free forgiveness of all of our sin. Once we are made aware of our need and our complete lack of ability before the Lord He intervenes with His Word of forgiveness. He comes to us in our filthiness and washes away our sin in the water of Holy Baptism. He comes to us as we are on our knees in humble repentance and announces that He Himself is here feeding into these bodies the medicine of immortality, the once dead but now forever living body and blood of none other than His beloved Son, Jesus Christ. He comes to us as we sit in the pew and hear His Word and He announces the perfect package: Law which reveals our sin and Gospel which wipes the sin away by His all-powerful Word: You are forgiven for all of your sin in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.