

Prayer for Illumination

O God, open us to your presence in the Word read and preached in this time. Lead us in understanding and faith, that we may know you more fully and trust you in all things. In Christ we pray, Amen.

Scripture: I Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1: 21-28

The Responsible Self

H. Richard Niebuhr, who had a distinguished career at Yale Divinity School in the middle of the last century, is easily in my top five favorite theologians. His ethical study, *The Responsible Self*, published shortly after his death in 1962, came to mind as I studied these two readings in preparation for this sermon. I must tell you, that was a revelation from God, for I didn't have a clue what to do with these two very different passages from scripture.

Niebuhr began his ethical study by noting that the word "ethics" derives from the word "ethos." That is to say that the first question one must ask in ethics is, what is the context, the ethos, in which one must seek to act. What are the facts of the situation? What values do I want to embody, or promote, in this context? What do I want to accomplish in my action? What communal or societal values might influence me, for good or for bad? Every situation that calls for a moral response provides an ethos in which I must act—thus, the field of ethics.

Two central emphases of the book are important for us this morning. First, Niebuhr, in very good Calvinist fashion, stresses that God is the providential, loving creator of all that is. God rules all creation, God is present in all of creation, and God is with us in all the circumstances of life, both good and bad. To put that another way, God is always the ethos within which we live our lives. To borrow the words of the psalmist: "Where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there." Like it or not, God is the constant context in which our days pass and our actions are chosen. I don't know about you, but that both sobers and comforts me.

Niebuhr's second emphasis is that, since we live constantly in God's presence, ethics for the Christian is always about how we understand and respond to God in each moment. Of course, one cannot achieve such a perfect life, but we seek to live faithfully in God as we have known God in Christ. This is the heart of Christian ethics—not the obeying of an unchanging set of rules, not asking for chapter and verse from the Bible regarding a particular issue or problem. Christian ethics requires thought, and prayer, and discernment, and humility, and honesty, and risk as we seek to understand God in life's situations. The punch line, if you will, of *The Responsible Self*, is this: "God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to [God's] action." (126)

Lest we misunderstand him here, or I leave the wrong impression, Niebuhr does not mean that God makes everything in our lives happen to us. For God to act in all actions on us means that God is in the situation, because God is present in all things, but not that God is causing this situation for us—especially the pain and sorrow that we sometimes bear.

Mark's portrayal of the beginning of Jesus' ministry manifests the presence of God with us. There are two parts of the story here: Jesus teaching in the temple and exorcising the demoniac. In each scene we learn both that Jesus was "teaching with authority" and that the people are astonished. It may seem strange to us to call healing a person possessed with a demon teaching, but we need to think of that word more expansively. Mark means here that in his person Jesus presents—in fact, he actually embodies—the good news of God's forgiving love. The first words out of Jesus' mouth in Mark are, "Repent and believe, the kingdom of God is at hand." Jesus himself brings the presence of God into the world; Immanuel himself brings the reign of God out of eternity, out of heaven, and makes it active in our world and in our time. In Christ Jesus, the new age of God has begun.

That is another way of making Niebuhr's point that God is the ruler, the protector, the neighbor, the creator, the lover, the redeemer of all creation at all times. Jesus Christ shows us the reality that God is the ethos in whom we live in all of life's situations. If we are in Christ we experience that presence of God and seek to live in it. One commentator urges that we move beyond the Jesus seen as a rule-giver

who restricts our life, move beyond the wonder-worker who might disappoint us if the miracle doesn't come when we need it, and embrace instead the "Jesus who will settle for nothing less than our wholehearted allegiance and unwavering trust and who silences even the most demonic voices of evil." When we experience the constant presence of God and the steadfast love of God in Christ as the ethos of our lives, we begin, truly, to know who we are, and whose we are.

In the reading from I Corinthians we begin to see how living in the context of God's presence leads to the responsible self. At first glance, a discussion about meat that had been offered to idols may seem like the most irrelevant issue in which we could engage. I don't know about you, but I can't remember the last time somebody offered me meat sacrificed to an idol. In fact, we can learn much from what Paul has to say.

The situation is this: in the ancient Greek and Roman culture, animals would be offered to gods and goddesses, just as the Hebrews brought their animals for sacrifice to the temple in Jerusalem. Following the sacrifice, the meat of the animal would be dressed and then cooked for a meal of people gathered in the temple. Some of the meat could be sold in the market, presumably so the sales would support the priests and the upkeep of the temple.

Some of the Corinthian Christians had scruples regarding the eating of such meat, thinking that it meant they were supporting, or even participating in, the worship of false gods. If the meat was sold as having been a part of idol worship, then wouldn't buying and eating that meat suggest your approval of that god or goddess? However, other Christians in the church took the attitude that those gods were no gods at all, and the believer in Christ could be free to eat the meat—it was just meat, no matter from where it came.

Perhaps those Christians who ate the meat were the wealthier, and therefore more educated, members of the Corinthian Church. Notice how often Paul refers to knowledge and those who have knowledge in these verses. "We know that all of us possess knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." Those who claim to know don't really know. Paul says that "we know that no idol in the world really exists." Sure, we know those things and we know that eating meat offered to gods who don't really exist can't do us any harm. We have enough education to know that, and we are deep enough in faith to know that there is no God but God. But others don't realize that yet, and we must be sensitive to how we can help them in faith. More than that, Paul suggests that the meat-eaters are pretty arrogant in their so-called knowledge—he notes that "knowledge puffs up."

We see the issue. People may be at different places in their faith journey, or they may understand the Christian life differently from one another, or some other difference may exist. Will we go ahead with what we see as permissible if it causes a difficulty for others, if it becomes, as Paul says, a stumbling block to others' faith? Love builds up. You may have the right to do something, Paul says, but does that mean it is wise, or helpful, to do it?

The meat-eaters in Corinth thought this issue had nothing to do with faith in Christ. Paul is reminding them that God is always the context in which they live, even in this. God was acting in this situation on the meat-eaters, and Paul is calling on them to act as to respond to God's action. That meant putting love above my own rights; that meant acting for the community of Christ's body, building up and supporting all the members of the church. If we look ahead to the famed chapter on love in I Corinthians 13, we see love that seeks the good of the other as the starting point for the Christian responsible self.

It seems like such a small and insignificant issue, this matter of whether or not we can eat meat offered to idols. But maybe in this day of concern for the treatment of livestock on factory farms and vegetarian and vegan diets, it isn't so small after all. I imagine in Matthew 25, when the sheep and goats are separated on the basis of whether or not they fed the hungry, or visited the imprisoned, or clothed the naked, both the sheep and the goats said, "But those were such little and insignificant moments." Exactly. God is in every moment, God is the ethos of every event; God is the context of every relationship—so respond to all actions upon you as to respond to God's action.

This is a hard business, this attempt of the Christian to be a responsible self. There are so many small, fleeting, insignificant moments in our lives. Someone tells a joke that perpetuates harmful stereotypes about African Americans, or Asians, or women, or the rural poor, or whatever. God is acting

on us in that action—do we respond to that joke as to respond to God? Someone shares a little rumor, or perhaps talks about another person behind their back. Such a small thing. God is acting on us in that action—do we respond as to respond to God? People express their cynicism regarding the political process and question the motives of everyone in political office. God is acting on us in that action—do we respond as to respond to God? In every conversation, every time we interact with another person, in every situation in which we find ourselves, even those we may not remember the next day, God is acting on us. We strive to be responsible in each one, for we never know when a word we say or an attitude we project will be perceived by another as God’s presence to them.

If it is important to respond to life’s common, mundane moments as to God, then how much more so to respond in that way to the big issues of our world. In this time in this place, the issue that leaps to mind is the ongoing racism of our nation as it has manifested itself in the past few years. In the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Andre Hill, and so many others; in the judicial process that followed; in the protests that have taken place; in the arguments and conversations that have taken place around dinner tables and office cubicles; God is acting on us. God is acting on me, on you, as individuals, and God is acting on us as a community of faith. What will it mean for us to respond to this issue so as to respond to God’s action in it?

The question of immigration is a major issue for our nation. One of the indications that the United States still offers freedom and opportunity in a way that some of the world does not is that people in need and despair and danger will risk their lives to come here. As people come to our shores, God is acting on us, individually and as a society, in that action. What will it mean for you, and for me, and for our nation, to respond so as to respond to God’s action?

For good reason, the problem of terrorism is in the news daily. What leads a young person to embrace a terrorist ideology—whether that person is Timothy McVeigh, blowing up a federal building in Oklahoma City, or Eric Rudolph, whose distorted Christianity led him to blow up a site in Atlanta where abortions were performed, or people flying planes into the World Trade Center, or attacking the Capitol of the United States. What leads a person to think such actions should be carried out? What world policies create the conditions in the world in which mentors can teach such ideologies? In every threat of terrorism, in every act of terrorism, God is acting on us individually and as a society. Again, I will say that I do not mean God causes or wills acts of terrorism; I do mean that God is in that situation and calls for a faithful response from us. What will it mean for you, and for me, and for our nation, to respond so as to respond to God’s action?

I think that Niebuhr was right, because what he said was basic to our Reformed theology. God is creator of all that is, God rules over all creation, and God is in our lives in all of its dimensions. God *is* the ethos in which and in whom we live and move and have our being, as the Bible puts it. Our call is to live responsibly within God’s constant presence, loving as fully as we can in serving God and our neighbor. May God give us grace to live in such faith. Amen.