

Paying lip service; A sermon on Isaiah 29:13-14. Rev. Rosalind Gnat, September 3, 2017

And so the Lord says, "*These people say they are mine. They honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. And their worship of me is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote. Because of this I will do something amazing among the people. The wise men will lose their wisdom and the intelligent will lose their intelligence.*"

Well – Jesus knew his Bible. The Gospels of Matthew and of Mark report him quoting today's text. "*These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.*" He was talking to the religious leaders and teachers. He went on to say, "*You skillfully sidestep God's law in order to hold on to your own tradition. For instance, Moses gave you this law from God: 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'Anyone who speaks disrespectfully of father or mother must be put to death.'* ¹¹ *But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, 'Sorry, I can't help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.'* ¹² *In this way, you let them disregard their needy parents. And so you cancel the word of God in order to hand down your own regulations.*"

I'm fascinated by this last bit: *you cancel the word of God in order to hand down your own regulations.* I cannot count the times that people have said to me, "the Old Testament was for the Hebrews. We have the New Testament and we don't need the old. We say things like that when, if we really paid attention to what Jesus had to say, we'd see that it was the old testament basics that mattered – things like Don't put any other gods before me; honor your parents; don't kill people or be unfaithful to your spouse; don't take what doesn't belong to you; don't make things up about other people that aren't true; don't be jealous of what others have.

Yes, that's all in the book of Exodus – those commandments. And maybe you're thinking Jesus never preached on these things. What about putting other gods before God? For Jesus, putting God first meant being a good citizen of this world. Feed the hungry; take care of your parents, having your moral priorities in line. What about the story of the rich man who spends his last days enlarging his business? You fool, God says. Tonight you will die. What good will your money do you then? Wealth, status, stuff – those are gods we can relate to, right? Putting stuff before God puts a person in danger of running right into some other Don'ts as well – like being jealous of what other people have.

The tradition that I grew up in preached: Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. Jesus didn't preach that. No, he didn't. He preached things like Love God, feed the hungry, visit those in prison and those imprisoned by sickness; take care of widows and orphans, appreciate the earth God has made. Jesus got frustrated with his so-called followers: Why do you call me Lord, Lord and you do not do what I say?

I invite conversations with people who have left the church. I want to know what drove them away: I've listened to a variety of answers, and not once has someone said, "You know, I really love the church, am inspired by the service, by the message, by what the church means to my community. But I really don't want to contribute financially anymore." Now a person earning €50.000 would pay in church tax around what she would

pay for a gym membership. It's not a deal-breaker if people have the feeling, they're getting their money's worth.

So what are the reasons I hear for leaving the church?

- A couple, Catholic but wanting to have their children baptized protestant, was refused by the pastor of the church they had been attending;
- Sunday should be a family day. There is little, if anything, to interest young children;
- A number of people said, "I find church depressing and stale. The pastor isn't speaking to me; I feel like we're all just going through the motions – the same motions we were taught in confirmation class;
- (also from several people) "I don't want to feel forced to parrot words I don't believe anymore just because it's too embarrassing to not go along with the crowd."

I asked our women's study group where, for them, "Church" as an institution misses the mark. Here are their answers:

- **We don't like Rules that shut people out.** The Church needs to ask itself, which of its rules are what Jesus taught, and which are, as Jesus said, man-made.
- **We're not comfortable with the appearance of hypocrisy.**
- **Is "Pay Church Tax or renounce your faith" fair; is it Christian?**
- **The Church is too compartmentalized.** Youth and helping programs are given over to professionals. We don't feel needed.
- **The Church's service to the community should be seen and felt.** The church does a lot of good in the community that people are unaware of.
- **Transparent stewardship – the church's books are open for anyone to see, but who can understand it all?** What does the church do with my money? If that were clear, I think more people would be willing to financially support those efforts.

Of course, I'm talking with a group of people who are, at least today, in church. Whatever the reason you are here – well, here you are. The fact of your being here tells me that, for us, congregating – coming together in a place like this; hearing music like this; singing together; praying or meditating or just being together has some meaning for you. This is the 500th anniversary year of the protestant reformation. Re-formation – to form anew – is the work of every living thing. Celebrating the past is not enough. In fact, the rule of nature teaches us that whatever is not growing and changing, is dying – or is dead.

I have a favor to ask of you. Our worship will be over in a few minutes. Hopefully you'll be able to stay for a cup of coffee. There's a book at the back. Please take a moment to write a couple of sentences – even a couple of words – telling me why you're here today; what you wish were different in this congregation. I invite you to let your voice be heard.

Amen