

Sermon Called to be Different
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 9.10.23

Before I jump into today's message, I should tell you that I spent all weekend replacing a hot water heater in our rental condo. If parts of this message relate to hot water heaters, now you'll know why. And no, the tank didn't burst, or leak; it was just twelve years old. They say heaters last between seven and ten years so it was time. Plus, I didn't want it to break, or burst, when we have tenants in the unit. It's just not a neighborly thing to do – to flood the downstairs unit or leave our tenants without hot water. It turns out, the hardest part of replacing a water heater is all the other work that goes with the replacement. In our case, this “other work” was replacing the flooring in the closet that houses the tank. So I did two things I've never done before: sweated pipes and pulled out carpet and laid laminate floor tile... and lived to tell the story.

Speaking of stories, the Bible lessons we hear every Sunday come from the schedule of the Revised Common Lectionary. The wise people who assembled the lectionary wanted to do a number of things: first and foremost, if you listen to the lessons every Sunday for three years, you will hear most of the Bible – the Old Testament, the psalms and the New Testament. Secondly, the lectionary gives you a narrative study which means, for instance, we are reading through the Book of Exodus through October and we have been reading the Letter to the Romans. In other words, they don't bounce around through the Bible; we read it through, book by book. Lastly – and this is the hard part – they assembled the readings so there is a common thread between the Old Testament, New Testament, and Gospel readings. One thing we listen for each week is what do these readings have in common.

I have been struggling with what the common thread is between these lessons today. The Exodus reading consists of instructions to the Israelites of how they are to prepare and eat the Passover lamb. The Epistle – New Testament – reading is from the Letter to Romans where Paul, the writer, tells the people that love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore, love is the fulfillment of the law – which, simply put, is the Ten Commandments. If you love your neighbor as yourself, you will not cheat them, or lie to them, or covet what they have; and certainly, if you love your neighbor as yourself, you will not murder them. Therefore, according to Paul, love is the fulfillment of the law. The Gospel lesson highlights Jesus' instructions about how to handle someone that transgresses against you. Instead of telling everyone else what that person did, Jesus tells us to instead talk directly to that person. And, if they don't listen, do it again, but this time, bring some people with you for support. What Jesus is asking is difficult; it's easier to talk about someone when they are not there instead of directly telling them that what they did hurt you or made you upset. But, Jesus asks us to do the right thing which sometimes is the difficult thing.

Starting on Tuesday of last week, I wondered what these readings had in common. I looked at the original language to see if there was something there. I talked it over with my friend, Fr. Alex Andujar. I prayed on it. And then, on Friday morning, as I was removing the hot water heater, it dawned on me.

God says many times in Scripture: *I am holy therefore I have set you aside to be different and to be the light to the nations.* What these three lessons call us to do is to be different than the rest of the world in order so that we can be the light to the world. The lessons call us to be set-aside, to be different, and that will make the light shine.

The Passover meal was, and is, one of the distinctive aspects of the Jewish faith. Although placing blood on the doorway so that the angel of death passes over the house was a one-time event, the practice of preparing and eating the Passover lamb is still happening today. It's been happening for over 3,000 years and is the oldest continuously celebrated holiday of the Jewish calendar. This sets the people of the Jewish faith aside from the rest of the societies of the world. It is a yearly reminder that God rescued the Israelites from bondage and set them free. It is through this remembrance, and celebration, that the light has come to the nations. Our celebration today of Holy Communion is grounded in the last Passover meal that Jesus celebrated. Instead of placing blood on the doorposts, we lift up the chalice of wine and remember that Jesus said *this is my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins* – Jesus is setting us apart and is setting us free from the bondage of sin! This practice, this unending weekly practice that we have done since the year 0032 sets us apart from the rest of the societies of the world. Through our release from bondage, we too are the light of the world.

Then there is Romans. *Love is the fulfillment of the law*; love also sets us apart. The one who loves their neighbor is different than others. It is our distinctive nature and our universal calling. Through this love the light shines for all the world to see. In the Gospel lesson, the one who tells their neighbor of their transgression; instead of telling everyone else but them; is an act of love, of self-sacrifice, of reconciliation and it is an act of the light. It sets us apart from the way that society behaves.

Speaking of how society behaves, Paul, in Romans, calls it out by naming it the works of darkness – debauchery, quarreling, jealousy. We have been set aside to do the works of the light which is to care for one another, to love as we have been loved, to forgive as we have been forgiven. That's the light and the work of the light. And we have been set aside to do it.

This morning I can feel a few muscles in my back that got a good workout this weekend. My thirteen-year old son watched me take the new tank out of the SUV and eventually put the old one in. He pointed to the heater box that says it's a two-person lift. I said, "It's a two-person, or one-dad, lift. If all you've got is one dad; well, it's going to get lifted." You know it's 90 pounds. In college I used to lift cheerleaders who were more than 90 pounds. But that's a different story and also a couple of decades ago. So I had the old tank at our house and was going to call Bradenton's refuse collection company to pick it up. Christi suggested we do something better. She said that I should try listing it for free on the Nextdoor app. Within 45 minutes, Matt responded to my post. On Saturday morning, I set the tank next to our driveway. It then went to another home. The tank was literally set-aside for a neighbor to use; and he was happy to get a free, working 30-gallon hot water tank!

Speaking of loving one another, All Angels has received money donations to go to help those in need in Maui and in other places around the world. The donation was set aside to help people. Although we can't jump on a plane and start rebuilding homes, some can help in this set-aside way. And, that brings the light into the world. It is our different, or distinctive way of acting in the world. It's the blood-on-the-doorpost, if you will, it's our way of walking away from jealousy and quarrelling and walking into the light of Christ and shining for others to see.

One more story: I told a parishioner last week that I was going to sweat pipes for the first time. He said that he has experience doing it and that I can call him and he'll come right over to help. As it turned out, by the time I finally got the flooring in and was ready for the plumbing, it was Saturday afternoon. I looked at my phone and thought about calling. Remembering how he walked me through the process, I decided to try it myself. Sure enough, it turns out, I can do it. But, I did it with the knowledge that he was a phone call away. That's love. That's the type of set-aside love that we are called to do that brings the light into the world.

These are examples of the distinctive nature of the holiness code outlined in Exodus, Romans and Matthew's Gospel; in other words, it is how we are called to be different – through acts of support and love.

There is that utopian idea that asks what if everyone followed this code, this way of being different. What if everyone in the world loved one another as we are loved. It's a great idea but you and I know both know that it is not realistic. The Passover instructions are not for how your neighbor is supposed to live. The Ten Commandments are not for you to tell your neighbor how to act; it is for how we, as individuals, as a family, and as a church, are supposed to act to our neighbors. It is our set-aside behavior that brings the light of God into the world. God has set us aside to shine the love of Christ. Resisting jealousy and quarrelling and instead loving others as we are loved brings the light of Christ into the world.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen