

Easter 6 – May 14, 2023
Text: John 14:15-21
Theme: Make Good Choices

I had gone to the mall with a friend and his kids to do some shopping. We were standing in the entry of a mall and I listened as he instructed his teenage daughters who were about to go off on their own to shop. He said to them, "Make good choices girls." I wondered what he meant by that, so I asked him. My friend is not religious. He's not opposed to religion. He just doesn't think he needs it or wants it in his life. So, he has not raised his children in the church. They might know the odd Bible story here and there from books their grandmother sent them, but they are teenagers and there has been no formal religious instruction for a long time. So, I was curious as to how they were supposed to know which choices were good and which were bad. I asked their dad how they were supposed to know.

He spoke the typical moralistic mush about being good people and recognizing that there are bad people in the world and how to avoid situations in which you might run into them. But that did not answer my question of how they would know what was good and what was bad. He got frustrated with me and told me that they don't buy into all that churchy stuff about the 10 Commandments that were given thousands of years ago and are still somehow supposed to give guidance to the people of the 21st century. I said

okay, but I still wanted to know how his children would know what was a good choice and what was a bad choice.

Eventually it came out. He and his wife and their circle of friends were the arbiters of what was good and what was bad and they had taught their children what was good and what was bad. Interestingly, upon some further probing, good revolved around what was profitable or pleasurable and bad revolved around what was painful or expensive. So, I asked him if it was possible, in his understanding of things, that a good choice might be profitless and painful? Now he was really tired of me. Who thinks like this? Who asks these kinds of questions about something as simple as telling your children to make good choices? He conceded that there might be a situation in which a good choice was painful but not profitless. "How could it be good if it didn't produce good results for you?" "What if it produced good results for someone else," I asked?

He conceded that it might be possible to make a good choice that was painful and was of no profit to you but it was still good because it profited someone else. I asked him, "Isn't that what Christ did for us?" Well, I'm not Christ and neither are my girls he countered and stomped off to find a Starbucks. I planted the seed. It has not taken root yet, that I know of, but that's the Holy Spirit's worry, not mine.

I think it would be frightening to live in this world and think that you have to be the arbiter of good and bad, right and wrong. I'm reminded of one of my foster kids who shared with me the fear he felt when a year after his mom had committed suicide, he woke up one morning to find his dad dead in bed from a drug overdose. With no other family, he suddenly realized that he was the oldest sibling and at 11 years old, he was in charge. He told me that the real fear was not having anyone to ask. There was no arbiter of good and bad, right and wrong, except himself.

I thought of when I was 11 and how, while my parents were by no means perfect, they were there. They were available to answer all my questions. They set parameters for me so that I could feel safe as I learned how to be independent. They took me to church where I learned how to strengthen my relationship with God so that even when my parents were gone, I would have a parent who I could ask and who would set parameters for me so I could feel safe. How frightening to be alone in this world and have to set all the parameters on yourself and others and just hope that those parameters were right.

That was what the disciples were considering in our Gospel for today. Jesus was getting ready to ascend into Heaven, an event for which we will gather here to celebrate on Thursday at 7pm. As they

prepared for Him to leave them, they were frightened. For four years they had had the absolute arbiter of good and bad, right and wrong, walking and talking with them and now He was leaving. Jesus tells them and us that we don't have to worry because he is not leaving us as orphans. He has sent His Holy Spirit to be with us until He returns for us. Orphans don't know what to think. They are like my foster son who found himself with no parents at 11 years old. What's good? What's bad? Who is to say? But we are not orphans. None of us who have been brought into the family of God through Holy Baptism can ever be orphans. We have the Holy Spirit given to us.

The Holy Spirit opens God's Word for us so that we know what is good and what is bad. Not only that, but once the Word is opened to us, we are empowered by that word to do good. Then, as if that were not enough, Jesus literally, physically enters us in His Holy Supper and dwells within us. Jesus does not leave us at the entrance of the mall with a fond platitude of "make good choices." He is the perfect parent who educates us and nourishes us with His very Word and Body and Blood and once Jesus is inside you, he walks with you every step you take. You have the power to make all the right choices, in fact, with Jesus inside you, you will have to work against Him in order to make bad choices. Jesus says to us,

“Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”

So, the Commandments are not some old arbitrary list of rules for an ancient people. They are the very keys to a relationship with Christ. If you have Jesus, you have the commandments. You keep them and love them because you love Jesus and He will manifest himself in you and you will know what choices to make. It’s not a mystery. At least it is not a mystery to those of us who have the Commandments. To those, like my friend’s daughters, who have never been taught, it is undecipherable and eventually they just have to rely on worldly wisdom and past experiences. Praise God that we are not such orphans, but that the Holy Spirit resides with us and in us and opens our eyes to God’s Word and empowers us to do what He commands and love what He commands.