

14C 2022

In today's reading, Isaiah is giving it to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

He tells them bluntly that God does not desire the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

“Who asked this from your hand?” Isaiah writes.

God is angry!

Isaiah continues, “Bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me.”

I have heard about an abomination going on in Sodom and Gomorrah, and here Isaiah specifies it in black and white.

It is the use of incense as an offering.

(Now I realize that at Christmas, when I am planning the liturgy, people will quote this line to me, “Incense is an abomination to me,” but remember the context.

This is incense offered to buy forgiveness of their sins.)

Isaiah explains to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah: “When you stretch out your hands, I will not listen . . . [because] your hands are full of blood.”

What have the people of Sodom and Gomorrah done that leads God to say they have blood on their hands?

What does God want from them in place of these offerings?

Isaiah does not leave them guessing:

“seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”

In other words, work together with your fellow human beings for mutual well being.

It seems the people of Sodom and Gomorrah have descended into a kind of everyone-pull-themselves-up-by-their-own-bootstraps selfishness.

This attitude is contrary to Judaism, contrary to Christianity, both of which see the entire creation as being mutually dependent, mutually responsible.

It seems the people of Sodom and Gomorrah have forgotten what my friend and colleague, Fran Salon-Peletier, uses these days as her email byline.

It is a quote from poet Gwendolyn Brooks: “We are each other’s harvest; we are each other’s business; we are each other’s magnitude and bond.”

Isaiah is telling the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, don’t go out and do selfish things that deprive others of their well being and then bring a dead bull to me and think that all is well.

Instead, stop killing bulls and stop being disobedient.

“Disobedient”: that is a tricky word.

People interpret obedience as meaning blindly following rules arbitrarily set up by God to test us, but that is exactly what the people of Sodom and Gomorrah *were* doing.

They blindly applied the rules about sacrifice without compassion.

They thought that they could be as selfish as they wanted and conceal it all with some smoke.

Obeying the will of God, however, is more of a general thing than a specific thing, more a thing of the heart than of the head.

One can check all the boxes, make sure that one has followed all the rules, and yet be utterly devoid of empathy, compassion, wisdom.

This is the point of *A Merchant of Venice*, which criticizes the application of law without mercy, rules without compassion.

Life is not black and white.

There are many ways to work out each problem—some are compassionate acts of integrity, some are selfish and manipulative, some are somewhere in between.

I suspect that an absolutely pure motive is not possible.

We live in the gray, stretched in tension with all that exists.

It is more about how we navigate the gray than about exactly what we do.

Did we look for positive solutions?

Did we seek to find a mutually beneficial resolution, or did we use our cleverness to benefit ourselves only?

“I deserve every penny I have. I worked hard to find ways to game the system and line my pockets to the detriment of others. I owe nothing to the teachers who taught me, the police who kept me safe, the nurses who kept me well.”

Cue the incense.

Obedience does not mean following arbitrary rules, but living in harmonious relationship with God and our created nature.

We were created to be in relationship with God and one another, to work together as the hands and feet of the body of Christ, to enter the messiness of relationship with sincerity and integrity and an open heart.

When we become selfish, uncaring, isolated, we are not living in accord with our nature.

Even when we follow all the rules, we may be out of step with our nature because rules cannot account for every possible exigency.

They cannot tell us what is a *compassionate* response.

Each occurrence demands that we consider the most harmonious thing to do.

(The less ethically developed we are, however, the more necessary the rules are for us.

In other words, if we are fairly devoid of compassion, it is better to follow the rules than to ignore them.)

It is even better, however, to live attuned to God and our own created nature.

God has built us with an internal harmony detector so that we know when we are succeeding.

We can sense to what degree we are in a harmonious relationship with God by how much peace we feel in our hearts.

We may feel almost no peace, some peace, considerable peace, or deep peace.

We do our best, and that is all one can expect in a relationship, whether with God or another person.

It is like tuning a piano—it will never be perfect, but it can be good enough.

The more we live in accord with our created nature and God, the less we struggle against reality, and the less we struggle against reality, the more freedom we have.

Otherwise, we are slaves to whatever idea has possessed us, though we imagine ourselves to be superior.

“I did some LSD” or “I spent an evening in a sweat lodge and, unlike you, I am now evolved,” yet from the outside, their lives look at least as messy as those of the rest of us.

I have a friend who, in trying (awkwardly) to support me once when I was grieving, wrote that Rumi had said: “Don’t grieve. Anything you lose comes around again in a different form.”

These lines encourage us to live out the fantasy that we can transcend our relationships with others and not experience the pain of the loss of someone.

In actuality, a friend who comes around in a different form is not the same friend.

It is nice to have a new friend, but the loss remains.

We must grieve rather than chasing after impossible fantasies that ultimately make us feel like failures.

Similarly, someone I know said within my hearing that COVID is just a cold!

“Just a cold!” she repeated a second time as if the more she said it, the more true it would become.

She, too, was ignoring created reality.

People die of COVID; when I was grieving, it was over a friend who had died of COVID.

I’ve never known someone to die of a cold.

We try to convince ourselves of things that are not true because we think that, if they were true, things would be easier (and by “things would be easier, we mean we would have less responsibility, less reason to be present to others because I do not want to be with you in your grieving).

“We do not have to grieve”; “we do not have to face a serious health threat.”

This is magical thinking, which does not free us.

In fact, the more we deny reality, the more enslaved to fantasy we become.

Because we are relating to those enslaving fantasies, moreover, we are less able to relate to others.

Thus we miss out on the most meaningful thing we can do here.

It takes a lot of energy to prop up “truths.”

In order to convince ourselves, we have to keep repeating them like a mantra, have to keep acting “as if” they are true, all the while missing what is.

The reason why some people are able to be present to others, to listen profoundly without interrupting to correct you, without telling you how you *should* feel, without simply changing the subject to talk about themselves, is because they are not distracted by what they want to be true.

They can be present to what is, and that includes us.

The truth is that life is full of challenges and we are not failing when we acknowledge these challenges.

We fail when we ignore them or try to reason them away for a preferred truth, or try to make others bear those challenges entirely for us, like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, who then used magic smoke to conceal their abuses.

Obedience means living in harmonious relationship with God, with truth, with reality,
with our created nature, and engaging in all the messiness that requires.

That is a relationship.

It does not mean being perfect or following all the rules, but doing the relationship work
of relating as honestly as we can to what is as we work things out.

We can talk with God about being mad at God, about doubts, about fears, about hopes
and joys.

We can be honest with God.

In a relationship, we do not get it right every time, but we can listen and share and try.

Learning this is one of the most significant achievements of our spiritual life.