

My Search for Absolutes

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)

November 18, 2018

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Our world is constantly changing, so much so that we may wonder if anything stays the same. Even religious people, who at one time were the most certain of things, are also now threatened by this relativity. For as much as we would like things to stay the same, we are powerless to hold the world back from the flow of time.

Our Gospel from *Mark* this weekend talks about the world changing very literally. In it, Jesus says that the days are coming when “the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from the sky.” Even that which seems so permanent and unfading won’t last forever. In this midst of this apocalyptic language, Jesus says something that we can hold onto, though: “heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” In other words, yes, a lot in life will not last- heaven and earth- but take comfort in knowing that my words, God’s words, last forever. These words are permanent, eternal, and unfading.

Paul Tillich, a 20th century German Lutheran theologian who really entered into the uncertainties of humanity, said: “In the different realms of man’s encounter with reality there must be some absolutes that make meaningful life possible, or it would be like the chaos before creation, described in Genesis. Therefore I believe it may be a service to life itself to find these absolutes and to show their validity and their limits.” (*My Search for Absolutes*, 66)

On the one hand, as Tillich said, we need to show the validity of these absolutes. Absolutes are those things that are always the same and never change. For life to make sense, there has to be at least a few of these stable reference points. Holding that there are no absolutes is self-contradictory. It is making an absolute statement against absolutes, which is an absolute itself. Through God’s word, we can list truth, love, and unity among the absolutes.

On the other hand, as Tillich said, we need to acknowledge their limits, too. We don’t want to overstate our case. To do so would be to ignore human experience of change and decay. Some of the aspects of religion that we put so much emphasis on

as unchanging are in fact passing away. We could see all the externals and symbols that we use in our worship as not being absolutes. They are means to an end, not the end in itself.

Even in our greatly changing world, we can still hold onto a few absolutes.

Question: What are the absolutes that I live by?

Upon reflection, we may realize that we are too dismissive of absolutes. We do need them because we do need sources of guidance and direction. As the world continues to change, and change quite rapidly, may we move ahead with confidence, knowing that heaven and earth will pass away, but God's words will not.