

Fall River Herald News Clergy Column August 8, 2020

A Human Being Does Not Live On Bread Alone

We are living in very fraught times these days. There's almost a surreal quality to what is happening all around us. We may ask ourselves: is this truly happening? Are the problems and challenges as enormous as they seem? Too often when we are in the midst of major events and situations it can be hard to see the larger picture. At the same time that we are being confronted with the multiple challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic that's already left over 160,000 dead Americans, the increasing recognition by people of systemic racism in our country and how that affects so many areas of people's lives, and the severe economic consequences of the pandemic, there are people who still insist that this is all a hoax. Looming in the background because of the severity of the immediate crises is the issue of climate change and the dire consequences to which that may lead if we're not willing to modify our lifestyles to combat it. Sadly, that too still has people who doubt the reality of it.

One of the questions that we cannot avoid asking is: "what sort of country, what sort of world do we want to leave our children and grandchildren? What sort of values do we want to pass on to them?"

This Shabbat's (Sabbath's) Torah portion (Deuteronomy 7:12 – 11:25) contains some of my favorite scriptural verses. Deuteronomy 8:3 is the very well-known verse: "a human being (*adam* in Hebrew) does not live on bread alone." That is the first half of the verse. The second half makes it clear that the verse is not talking about a balanced diet or avoiding carbs. The second half makes it clear that our connection to G!d is fundamental. The first half of the verse uses the word "bread" to stand for food in general and also for material existence. If we ignore our material existence, we will cease to live. But if we make our material existence the central focus of our lives, the "end all and be all" of our lives, what kind of life is that? A life that lacks spiritual values and a spiritual core will be less likely to see the intrinsic value in all living things. It will be less likely to feel empathy for others and identify with others, not only other people, but other species and the planet itself which is a living organism too.

I define the term "spiritual" broadly to refer to that level of existence which transcends material existence and which is eternal. It can be difficult in times of crisis, when our very material existence is threatened, to try to remain present and aware of our spiritual lives.

However, times of crisis are also times that it is truly imperative to remain connected to our inner beings. At the same time it is essential to recognize the inter-connectedness of all life on the planet and of all the people who share this wondrous world with us. If we don't remain cognizant of the bigger picture we might sacrifice the long-term good for a short-term benefit. To give a very immediate specific example, we may feel lonely and feel imposed upon having to wear a mask in public and maintain social distancing, but we owe it to the overall well-being and health of the community in general to protect other people by wearing masks and maintaining social distancing in public. That's part of what it means to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18), or as it's phrased in this Shabbat's Torah portion: "love the stranger" (Deuteronomy 10:19) and "circumcise your hearts" (Deuteronomy 10:16) i.e. be tender-hearted and compassionate, think about the good of the community as a whole.

Every religious tradition with sacred scripture reads those scriptures over and over. In the Jewish tradition we read through the entire Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) and other sections of the Hebrew Bible during the course of every year. Does scripture change from year to year as we reread it? No, but hopefully we do, and we may see in the same scriptural passages we've read many times, things we didn't see before. We may find new insights and inspiration. The world also changes over the course of our lives and that affects how we understand the world and our lives in it and, consequently, how we understand the very same verses we've read before. Everyone has their unique perspective on things. Everyone has something to contribute to the world to construct a better future. Everyone has love to give that can make someone else's life better. May we give strength and love to each other in coping with the challenges we face in these unusual times.