

February 12, 2023  
Epiphany 6-A  
All Saints', Littleton, NH  
The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

Psalm 119:1-8

1 Corinthians 3:1-9

Matthew 5:21-37

Let's talk about the 'Law'. The Old Testament, Psalm and Gospel today are more explicit in a discussion of the Law, and the passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians has to do with living truly spiritual lives. For much of Christianity there has been a tension between law and spirit, and to some degree it is lived out in every generation – do we live by the letter of the law or the spirit of the law? The passage in Matthew, near the end of the Sermon on the Mount, is an interesting treatise by Jesus on our relationship with the 'Law'.

Let's start with discussing what is law. Deuteronomy is the 5<sup>th</sup> book of what is commonly called the law of Moses, or the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the Bible). It is full of commandments, laws and statutes that describe how the Israelites must live and behave. The most famous of course being the 10 Commandments. The passage that was read today is actually from an address by Moses near the end of Deuteronomy just before he died and before the Hebrews went from the land of Moab into Canaan, the promised land, after he had led them wandering in the wilderness for 40 years.

Most scholars suggest that this part of Deuteronomy was probably written long after Moses died and in fact could have been written more than 400 years later when the people of Israel were actually nearing the end of the Babylonian Captivity, or perhaps even after they came home to

Palestine. This address by Moses is all about the importance of keeping the Law in order to maintain God's blessing on the people and in order to keep the nation safe.

But let's examine 2 notions of 'the Law'. One, to be sure, is all about the 'laws' in Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch – the individual commandments and statutes. But there is another notion of the Law that is more universal and esoteric. When 'the Law' is referred to it has a meaning that is more than the sum of its individual parts. There is a notion that keeping the 'Law' is fundamentally about achieving right relationship with God and living in a state of 'righteousness' or 'holiness' in the Hebrew senses of those words. For the Israelites, following the laws (small 'l') helps them to achieve big 'L' Law as if it represented what we would say, is a state of 'grace'. (but law and grace are at the heart of what became and continues to be a source of Christian theological tension!) And there is definitely a notion of the law that is more than following rules and it is something that can take root in your heart and in some ways is self-evident to the spiritual person.

The section just before the one read this morning brings this insight when 'Moses' says: v. 11...."For this commandment which I command you this day is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. 12 It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' 13 Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' 14 But the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it."

Does anyone else see the seeds of some of Jesus' teaching in this statement?

It is this spirit of Law that is captured so well throughout the Psalms, and most especially in Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is a very long Psalm of an *acrostic* nature. An acrostic poem or song is a literary device where the first word or syllable of each line begins with the same letter or a specific letter and subsequently spells out a word or message, or in our case, the

alphabet. There are 22 sections of Psalm 119 and each section begins with a letter of the alphabet in sequence, and each stanza of each section begins with that letter. (see BCP titles of sections) If we were reading this in Hebrew, we would easily see that. This first section of Psalm 119 is Aleph, the first letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

This section begins the overarching theme of the Psalm, which is about keeping God's commandments, statutes, decrees – 3 words repeated throughout the Psalm to refer to the law. Throughout the Psalms you hear the writer expressing such a longing for the 'law' as if it was so desirable because it was so beautiful, and that living in 'the Law' somehow made life worth living. One cannot help but think of this kind of relationship with the 'Law' as somehow embodying the 'shalom' of God – the peace of God.

Now let me turn to Matthew and then end with a bit of Corinthians. This portion of the Gospel of Matthew near the end of the Sermon on the Mount seems to be an unusual tack for Jesus as commentary on the Law. He just finished telling his listeners the gracious beatitudes (actually quite consonant with Old Testament teaching in many ways – Blessed are the poor, those who mourn, peacemakers, those who suffer for righteousness); and last week we read his teaching that we should be people of salt and light to the world. Now he turns to the law in, at first glance, a rather harsh interpretation. But let's take a closer look.

Jesus takes, in turn, a number of sayings and begins each with "You have heard it said", which is a reference to either a direct law or an ethic derived from the law. He then goes on to expand on each saying and goes beyond the 'letter of the law' to the spirit that is behind it. So, as in the first case, it's not good enough to just not kill someone you despise, you need to make peace with them. And notice in this first instance he doesn't say if you have something against them, he says if they have something against you it is incumbent on you to go make peace before you come to the altar. In this way he places 'authentic' worship in the context of everyday ethics and relationships with others!

In his second example he takes on lust, divorce, and adultery. Well there's a cheery group of sins! His example about lust in your heart is one that Jimmy Carter made famous by his confession. And a little aside, about the plucking out eyes and cutting off hands – bring that up next time talking to a Biblical literalist and see what they say! Now, what about his teaching about divorce? Did you know that a Jewish man could divorce his wife for almost any cause, but he needed to give her a divorce decree to set her free (there was no allowance for women to divorce their husbands). Jesus' teaching here was profoundly protecting women from poor treatment by men.

And finally, there is this teaching about not swearing by anything, just be honest and truthful in all your dealings. It is interesting, in light of this teaching from Jesus, that in much of the Christian West we have made it a thing to swear by or on the Bible – how ironic. It is for this reason that some people in sects of Christianity refuse to swear by anything on religious principle (this principle) and simply 'affirm' they are telling the truth in court, and courts make allowances for this. Swearing by 'things', as Jesus was saying, belies the fact that you are not being truthful in the first place! His teaching here is just be honest and truthful!

Finally, a word about living as truly spiritual people, a word about living in community, and a word about antinomianism – yes 'antinomianism'! Paul's letter to the Corinthians was taking on a church that longed for spirituality, but also prided itself on its spirituality---ergo, "I am from Paul, or I am from Apollos" ---a sort of: "I got baptized by the bishop" versus, "well, I got baptized by the Pope!". The people there were trying to polish up their spiritual credentials and boast of their spiritual accomplishments.

And this is where these 3 readings and the Psalm begin to pull together. The Law is more than the laws. It should be more than just conforming to rules – as in Deuteronomy – 'but the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart.' So too Jesus, it is not just a matter of

keeping the letter of the law, it is living above and beyond it into the spirit of the law.

And here we engage antinomianism. This is a term that Martin Luther coined, the English derived from the Latin meaning ‘against’ the ‘law’. Antinomians were those who believed that no written moral laws apply to Christians because we all live only by faith and by grace. In Christianity there has been a constant struggle between law and grace. In the early church there were some, the Gnostics and Manicheans, who pretty much turfed the whole Old Testament. They thought all the “Law” just didn’t apply to Christians. In Luther’s time the Protestant Reformation was based very much on the notion that you were saved by grace and not by works. Works, you see, would be following the ‘Law’ – either those from the Old Testament or those laid down by the church. Luther, though accused at times of being Antinomian, was actually a defender of the need for Old Testament teaching and for moral law. But he and many reformers always put a finer point on this by saying that the true believer does live by faith, and if living by faith then he or she will naturally follow the ‘Law’, and more than that, he or she will live beyond the law as Jesus taught and as Paul was trying to inspire the Corinthians to do. And, as Paul said, it is not just an individual thing, it is lived out in community with your brothers and sisters: “The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose.....For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.”

Living this kind of spirituality is at the core of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Living this kind of authentic spirituality is not about just following laws, it is about experiencing God in such a profound way that we don’t struggle to achieve conformity with laws, but we live so much in tune with God and the big ‘L’ Law’ – the oneness with God, the shalom of God-- that in some sense, they don’t matter. Another way of saying this, is that we live in a state of ‘grace’ .... but we don’t take it for granted and we are ever conscious of it!