

"The Law and God's Grace"

Texts: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Philippians 3:4-14 (Series A, 18th Sunday after Pentecost) Ps. 19

Matthew 21:33-46

Let us Pray –

Creator and maker of us all - bless the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts- grow thou in us and show us your ways and inspire us to live by your truth.
Amen.

Today we are here, as we are here each Sunday, some of our sisters and brothers are reading this message at home as we all worship God. And as part of that we gather to express our thanks giving and to receive hope and some encouragement. Each week we gather we do so to devote ourselves anew to God, and to listen - to listen in the hope that God will speak in a special way to us and that we will be able to do what it is that God asks of us.

We listen, and we pray, and we sing (not laud) hoping that the comfort of the Holy Spirit will lift us up and give us the peace that Christ promised to those who follow him. Sometimes when we worship, however, we are reminded of how far we have yet to go in our Christian walk:

- perhaps the prayer of confession comes a little too close to home
- or the preacher reminds us of what we have promised – and not yet done
- and instead of feeling comforted by the word we feel ill at ease - perhaps even feel frightened.

Christian churches all around the world today there are hundreds, perhaps thousands of preachers who are misusing the law of God - preachers who are beating up on their congregations with the law,
-- but even where that law is not being used as whip, there are likely hundreds of thousands, of people who feel uncomfortable because they believe they are hearing too much about 'thou shall not' the law of God and not enough about the grace of God.

What do you think of the law of God? Do you think that the law and the grace of God are two different things? Or at the very least, that God's love for us in Christ supersedes the law of Moses? That the law is restrictive and out of date?

John Killinger wrote a book on the Ten Commandments a few years ago. It is called *"To My People With Love"* In it he tells the story of a man who came home from work one afternoon and found his daughter sitting out on the porch. He could tell something was wrong, so he said to his wife: "What's wrong with Janet?" She replied: "Oh, she just found out there's a law of gravity, and she's mad about it."

Some people regard the law of God as restrictive and out of date, they see it as binding and hemming them in at every side, and as having no place in the life of freedom that Christ gives us. I think this is sad - it is sad because the law of God *was and is an expression of love* - it is the answer to the old question - what do I do after I say "I love you?".

The Jewish people call the law "Torah" - and Torah literally means "guidance" or "help". That is what the law is meant to be for us - it is meant to be a guide or a help to us as we seek to love God and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

In order to put the Law and God's grace to proper perspective Jesus tells a story *an infamous* Vineyard scenario. This time Jesus tells us a parable about the tenants who are running the place and when the owner's representatives came to collect the owner's share of the produce, the evil and rebellious tenants *beat one, stoned one, and killed another.*

The owner sends a second group who received the same treatment. Finally, the owner sent his son, assuming his son would be treated with all due respect. But even the son was killed so the conspiring tenants could "get his inheritance." (Mt 21:38b)

At first glance, I can't help wondering if some of these *tenants* had been the unhappy workers of the previous vineyard parable, those who worked longer hours and received the same pay as those who worked fewer.

At second glance, I feel as if I'm reading a headline about a local, national, or even international situation. Hateful rhetoric, tragedy, and rage seem to be so commonplace, as to almost desensitize us from shock.

The headlines on air and in print show us that every-day life is getting meaner by the moment. Not unlike in Jesus' own time, brutality in word and deed is the tool of vengeful cowards who know no other way to express their own fear and impotence.

And then there's the third glance, Jesus is giving a lesson to the disciples about what is happening then, what is to come, and the Pharisees unhappily get the picture about who's who and what's what in this parable.

And as they should know, God is pretty clear in Exodus about The Law ~ how we are to behave ourselves and toward one another. We are the tenants in this parable as the vineyard is all of Creation and God is the owner.

Our travel along this temporary road of earthly life is filled with bumps, potholes, sunshine, rain, disasters, Covid-19 and rewards, and everything else. While we often despair of the mean-ness in today's world, we are to take heart and even rejoice in the Presence of Christ, the Cornerstone of our spiritual foundation. The Summary of the Law that Jesus gives us in Mark 12:29-31 is our simple map to guide us forward.

As we work for the good of this vineyard in faith, hope, and love, let us seek in Christ the nourishment, renewal, and the revival of our souls that readies and steadies us for all that is to come. So, who wants to join this group of good tenants, anyone? Let's gather and press on toward the Cornerstone that is the Living Christ.

So, it is with the law of God. It is not there to make us miserable. Nor, in Christ, is it there to make us feel guilty or inadequate. It is there to help us to love one another; to help us to love ourselves; and to help us to love God.

In a moment - as we partake of the blessed sacrament, the sign and symbol of God's love and grace towards us, it is entirely appropriate for us to consider the law of God - and to remember that Jesus - when he died for us - died entirely blameless under the law of God.

Jesus was not blameless under the law of God because he rigidly kept every letter of the law. **No** - he was blameless because he lived in the spirit of the law - the spirit of love and obedience. Friends, the law is good -- for it comes from God.

Faith reminds us of the promises that God has made to us – faith reminds us of who God is and what he has done and what he is going to do - and of the goal that we are moving toward and the prize that we are striving to obtain, a prize that God gives to us - not because we have somehow earned it, but because he loves us.

Paul is writing to his most loyal congregation. He wants them – and us – to understand that in strength of faith, even during hardship, we can *press on...because Christ Jesus has made us his own*. Our power comes from our Lord through our faith. Some days are easier than others.

Paul suggest most strongly that our focus needs to be upon knowing Christ and the power that raised him to life. Upon moving forward in life toward the goal which lies ahead of us - towards "the prize of being called to heaven" - a prize that God offers to us freely because of what Christ Jesus has done. From a faith that is focussed like this comes the will and desire to do all that one can do:

- ❖ to love as God loves and do as God would do,
- ❖ to love as Christ loved and do as he did when he walked among us -

From a faith that is focussed on God's and desire to obey Praise be to God for his grace and his love, the Law which he gives to comfort, strengthen, and guide us.

As we take into our hands in a few minutes the signs and the symbols of our faith, as we hold the bread and the cup and share with our brothers and sisters around the world today, let us remember that while Jesus has set us free from the law of sin and death, and that while in his love he forgives us completely for all that we have done wrong.

He has called us to live by the law of the spirit of life, a law which - when it is only expressed on tablets of stone leads us nowhere -but when written upon our hearts - makes all of human life a joy and a blessing. Be Blesses. Amen.

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