

Life-Giving Law

The older you get, the more you appreciate Law.

Most of you are aware that this congregation has a tradition of a summer youth mission trip. The trip doesn't always go far away—in fact, we have a rotation plan which has the youth doing a local mission trip one year, a trip within Montana the next, then a trip within the United States, and then an international trip the fourth year. This summer's trip to Skagway, Alaska is far enough away and exotic enough that we are counting it as international—and we will sail through Canadian waters to get there—but the opportunity to serve the church in Skagway where Ryan Mandeville is pastor was just too good to pass up. So it works out that as a young person goes through high school, he or she can learn from experience that God's work can be carried out everywhere in the world—wherever we find ourselves in life, we are called to be in mission with God. When we go on mission trips, we always go to serve alongside Christians who are already serving Christ, to support and give them a boost in the mission they have discerned. This is a long-standing tradition in this congregation. I've been privileged to lead many of these trips, and they make a difference both in the lives of our youth and in the communities we have served.

Now, anyone who has traveled with young people knows that there are some risks involved. Anyone who has traveled with a group of people of any age knows that there are potential problems. So in order to minimize certain kinds of risks, we always work to build the team before we depart. And part of the team building process is the development of and mutual agreement on a Covenant. I let the youth suggest what should be in the covenant, with some adult shaping if needed. I could just tell them the rules, but this way they own it, because they wrote it. As an illustration, let me share with you the covenant which the youth developed for the mission trip to Mexico four years ago.

First, the assumptions:

- We will be living together, youth and adults in a Christian community.
- Christian community is based on love, respect, trust, and support.
- Each of us as a member of the community is important.
- We will be in Christian community with our host church in Mexico.
- From the beginning of the trip until the end, we commit to letting our actions show that we are a Christian community.

And then, our covenant with one another, the “rules,” so to speak. There were 10.

1. We will treat others as we would want to be treated.
2. Everyone will work to their potential.
3. No whining.
4. Be a team player.
5. No alcohol, illegal drugs, or tobacco use (all ages).
6. No judging of others.
7. Watch out for one another.

8. Respect private space.
9. No wandering away from the group.
10. Respect others' customs.

Everyone always gets a copy of the covenant, and must sign and date it. And they know the consequences for any serious infractions. Most of them can recite the steps. "We call your parents. They come and get you. They take you home." That really is enough to keep anyone who likes to push the limits within bounds!

The older you get, the more you appreciate Law. Or at least the kind of covenant which helps us be the best people we can be, living in community with one another and—in the case of a mission trip—with Christ.

In the Christian church throughout the centuries, there has often been an ambivalence about the Old Testament "Law" or "Torah." Contained within the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, what we know as the Old Testament, is the covenant under which the Hebrew people were expected to live as the people of God. Including the ten commandments, there are 613 rules. Orthodox Jews strive to keep this Law today. But Christians have mixed feelings about these rules. On the one hand, Jesus broke some of the biblical laws and said things like "The Sabbath was made for humans, not the other way around." On the other hand, he also said things like "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come to fulfill them," and "Whoever breaks one of the least of the commandments will be last in the kingdom of heaven." (Mt :15-18) On the one hand, Paul tells us that we are saved not by works, but by faith. And on the other hand, he writes, we who have died to sin cannot go on living in sin. (Rom 3-6) So in the Christian church there is a stream of thought which emphasizes the grace and forgiveness of God, as well as a stream of thought which emphasizes our good works and adherence to God's way. So which is it? Gospel, or Law? Grace, or Obedience?

2009 is the 500th anniversary year of John Calvin's birth. You remember John Calvin—that brilliant Reformer who wrote volumes and volumes of theology and biblical commentary that formed the basis of the Presbyterian and Reformed tradition? You remember Calvin, that dour 16th century fellow? His thoughts about the Law, that is, the whole way of life prescribed by the Old Testament, are quite relevant even today. The law has three functions, he says. First, it is like a mirror. We look in it and can see the spots on our face, and that motivates us to do something to remedy the problem, that is, to seek God's grace. Secondly, the law is like a fence, which restrains the actions of those who lack internal controls. If only Bernard Madoff had paid attention to the fence that says "You shall not steal!" Every day we are aware of people who need this function of the law. But thirdly, and Calvin felt most importantly, the law is like a guide to God's will, a instruction book for believers which has the power to "arouse (them) to obedience, be strengthened in it, and be drawn back from the slippery path of transgression." (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 2, chapter 7, 7-12)

It's not as simple as "follow the law and God will favor you," a static system of reward and punishment. But it's also not as simple as "forget the law, for God's grace will save you." God's grace is in the law, thoughtfully understood and obeyed. So today we followed an old tradition of the church and after our confession of sin, after our assurance of God's grace, we heard the reading of the law, as if to remind us, "this is God's gift to you

who are forgiven and freed—a guide to living God’s way!” Many of the 613 laws of the Bible are no longer pertinent to life in the 21st century. They set the Israelites apart from their neighbors and made them distinct, but as Christians we are no longer bound by all those laws. For when he was asked, Jesus didn’t want to quibble with the teachers of the law, so he summed up what was pertinent in two commandments: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Mt 22:37-40) And what are those commandments all about but right relationship? The commandments are about relationship to the Lord of life, and relationship to the Lord and to neighbors is the reward of the commandments. The question is not law or gospel, grace or obedience, for life following Jesus flows from gospel to obedience to grace to law and round about again. The older you get, the more you appreciate law. The wiser you get, the more you appreciate grace. We need both, and God knows it.

A story is told in the Hasidic Jewish tradition. A disciple asks the rabbi, “Why does Torah tell us to ‘place these words *upon* your hearts?’ Why does it not say to place these holy words *in* our hearts?” And the rabbi answers, “It is because, as we are, our hearts are closed, and we cannot place the holy words in our hearts. So we place them on top of our hearts. And there they stay until one day, the heart breaks and the words fall in.” (Parker Palmer, “The Broken-Open Heart,” *Weavings* XXIV:2, p. 11) That is a description of grace opening us up to God’s will, expressed in God’s commandments.

So now we have sorted through our mixed feelings about the law, we are finally ready to join the psalmist and sing praises to God for the law as a gift. Now we are ready to say yes, we appreciate God’s decrees, God’s precepts, God’s commandments, God’s ordinances, God’s law. For God’s law is not tossed out by the gospel of Jesus Christ—rather, the gospel of Jesus Christ breaks open our heart and lets God’s words fall in. And then we can live the joyful, abundant, blessed, loving life God has always wanted for us! The “law” for the psalmist is what we who know Christ know as the way, the truth, and the life. It is what God has wanted for us all along, and it is offered to us in love, and for love.

The life that God offers to us in Christ is, as the psalmist says, much more desirable than all the gold in the world. It is sweeter than the sweetest honey, more satisfying than any fleeting taste of the best the world has to offer. Life in Christ is life in right relationship to the creator of all, whose love for humankind is so great that he chose a people to bless the nations of the world and gave them a way to live that would embody love. God’s love for us is so great that he gave us Jesus, his Son, and Jesus gave his life for us. Life in Christ means right relationship with others, in a community that reveals God’s will and direction and is guided by God’s way. Life in Christ holds these two all-important dimensions—loving God and loving neighbor—in creative tension, like a cross that lifts us upwards towards God and outwards towards one another.

I love the words of Jesus which tell me to love the Lord my God with all my heart and soul and mind, and to love my neighbor as myself. They are a mirror to show me where I am flawed, they are a fence to protect me and those around me, and most of all, they are a guide to instruct me in my daily living. Are they the same for you? On our mission trips, this pair of laws is fundamental, our starting place. But one of the things I love about mission trips is that they are a concentrated and focused experience of Christian living and learning. It was while the Israelites were a traveling community that God gave Moses the

law, saying, "I will be your God; you will be my people—and if you are going to represent me in the world, this is how I want you to live." It was a covenant given to a traveling community. So it was that when Jesus was on his way to the cross, traveling with his community, he gave them his summary of the covenant, so that they could keep on traveling in his way when he was not with them. So it is that in the same way, on our mission trips, we live by a covenant, for we are a traveling community representing Christ. And it works! It works as a mirror, and as a fence, but most importantly, as a guide which works its way into our hearts and makes us more like Jesus.

That is our Lenten journey, isn't it? That is our life journey, isn't it? Seeking to be more like our Lord and Savior, on this "mission trip" called life, traveling with Jesus.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be acceptable to you, O God, our rock and our redeemer.