

A Law Written On Our Hearts
Jeremiah 31:31-34 & John 12:20-33
Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church
1001 W. Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616
March 18, 2018 — 5th Sunday in Lent
Pastor Tom Thews

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (NIV)

³¹“The time is coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. ³³“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. ³⁴No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

John 12:20-33 (NIV)

²⁰Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. ²¹They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. “Sir,” they said, “we would like to see Jesus.” ²²Philip went to tell Andrew; Andrew and Philip in turn told Jesus.

²³Jesus replied, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. ²⁵The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me.

²⁷“Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. ²⁸Father, glorify your name!” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again.”

²⁹The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. ³⁰Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine. ³¹Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. ³²But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” ³³He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

A Law Written On Our Hearts

You’ve seen her — the lady with the blindfold, a balance, and a sword. She is Lady Justice. She is supposed to represent our judicial system. Since the 15th century the blindfold has represented the idea that justice should be meted out objectively, without fear or favor, regardless of identity, money, power, or weakness.

At least that's what the lady with the blindfold is supposed to represent. For some of us that blindfold may represent the imperfection of some of those who make our laws. After all, there are some crazy laws on the books in some of our states.

For example, did you know that in Connecticut you are not allowed to walk across a street on your hands? I didn't realize that this was a problem in Connecticut.

In Florida a special law prohibits unmarried women from parachuting on Sunday. I'm not certain why it applies only to unmarried women, but, single ladies, there go your plans for the afternoon.

In Kentucky it is illegal to transport an ice cream cone in your pocket. So forget about sneaking an ice cream cone into the Kentucky Derby. I understand it's also quite messy.

In Nebraska a parent can be arrested if his child cannot hold back a burp during a church service. So parents, be listening vigilantly.

On a civic level, in Zion, Illinois, it is illegal to give lighted cigars to dogs, cats, and other pets. By that standard we really do care more about our pets than our young people.

In Bexley, OH, Ordinance #223 prohibits the installation and usage of slot machines in outhouses. You have to wonder how that law came about.

In Gary, Indiana, it is illegal to go to a movie, to the theater, or to ride public transportation within four hours of eating garlic. It's nice to know that Indiana, at least, has a law that makes sense.

Here's one I will be arrested for if I ever preach in Nicholas County, WV. In that county it is illegal for a member of the clergy to tell jokes or humorous stories from the pulpit. Thank God that's not a crime in our community. But then, perhaps I have not yet really told one, and I am the only one unaware.

That's enough silliness for today. But we do want to give some thought to the Law. Our lesson for the day is one of the most beautiful and important prophecies in the Hebrew Bible. It is from the prophet Jeremiah:

"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the Lord. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more (Jeremiah 31:31-34)."

What an extraordinary statement! You know how important the Law was to the Jews. The people of Israel for hundreds of years had been the people of the Law. From the time Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai to our current day — the Ten Commandments, plus the other 613 written and oral commandments in Judaism, have played a fundamental role in Jewish life.

As someone has noted, Judaism is not just a set of beliefs about God, man and the universe. Judaism is a comprehensive way of life, filled with rules and practices that affect every aspect of life: what you do when you wake up in the morning, what you can and cannot eat, what you can and cannot wear, how to groom yourself, how to conduct business, who you can marry, how to observe the holidays and the Sabbath, and most important, how to treat God and other people. To be an observant Jew is to pledge allegiance to God's Law as revealed in the first five books of the Bible.

And yet here is this prophet of God saying that the days are coming when God will put His "law in their minds and write it on their hearts." No longer will the people have an external list of commandments, but they will have an internal guide on how to live. How will God do that? We in the Christian community believe that this prophecy was fulfilled in a little town of Bethlehem 2000 years ago when a babe was born and the "Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

No longer were the people of God constricted to a written code. In Jesus of Nazareth they could see in the flesh what God desires out of us. It is to live as Jesus lived. The Word which had been handed down on Mount Sinai was fulfilled by the Word who came to earth and dwelt among us whose name is Jesus. And, when we understand that truth, it changes everything about what we believe about the Law. When we understand this truth — that God has made a new covenant with humankind through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ — we become empowered to move beyond being simply law-abiding folks to persons who are making a real difference in the world. Now please do not misunderstand me.

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT WE BE LAW ABIDING!

We should abide by the laws of God as well as the laws of the state. Disobey the laws of the state or the community in which we live and we may land in jail. Disobey the laws of God on a regular basis and we will find ourselves estranged from God.

Let's use an example. It might surprise you to know that writer Ernest Hemingway, author of such works as *The Sun Also Rises*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and *A Farewell to Arms* was the son of devout Christian parents. Hemingway's writing, however, exhibited none of the beliefs his parents tried to instill in him.

A letter from his mother written in 1920 illustrates how completely he had divorced himself from their beliefs: "Unless you, my son, Ernest, come to yourself, cease your lazy loafing and pleasure seeking... stop trading on your handsome face... and neglecting your duties to God and your Savior Jesus Christ.... there is nothing for you but bankruptcy; you have overdrawn."

Hemingway told a writer for Playboy magazine in 1956 that "what is immoral is what you feel bad after." By his own standard, then, he was a man of unimpeachable morals — nothing made him feel bad. "People with different ideas about morality would call him a sinner," the article continued, "and the wages of sin, they say, is death. Hemingway has cheated death time and time again to become a scarred and bearded American legend," said this writer, "a great white hunter, a husband of four wives, and a winner of Nobel and Pulitzer prizes.... Sin has paid off for Hemingway," the article continued.

Ten years later, however, in the same magazine there appeared a review of the book *Papa Hemingway* by A.E. Hotchner. It gave a different account of Hemingway's life. What we find there is a

chronicle of repeated suicide attempts, paranoia, multiple affairs and marriages, and finally, on his return to his Ketchum, Idaho, hideaway, his final — and successful — suicide attempt. Ernest Hemingway thumbed his nose at the laws of God and he paid the price of doing so.

As the great missionary/theologian of yesteryear, E. Stanley Jones used to say, “We don’t break God’s laws. We break ourselves on God’s laws.” It is important that we obey the law, whether it is the laws made by human beings or the law of God. But it is important for us to see that obeying God’s law is not enough.

MERELY OBEYING THE LAW IS NOT WHAT THE CHRISTIAN FAITH IS ABOUT.

This is critical! Many Christians, even today, settle for being law abiding. They are nice, moral people, but they don’t have a clue what God really expects out of them.

This was the situation of many of the Pharisees that Jesus encountered. They kept the letter of the law, but not the spirit of the law.

Pastor John Ortberg tells about a group known as the “blind and bleeding rabbis.” They were called that because, in order that they could never be accused of violating the commandment against adultery, not only would they never speak to a woman, but they would close their eyes when one came into their peripheral vision. The result of this was that they were forever falling off curbs and bumping into buildings.

Well, congratulations to them for avoiding adultery, but closing your eyes whenever a woman is present is not the same as showing women respect or, in the case of a woman who is in need, showing her compassion.

You can be law abiding and still be worthless as far as the Kingdom of God is concerned. For example, you can obey the law and ignore acts of injustice going on all about you.

Dr. David Zersen once noted that during Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s time, specifically in 1933, roughly 2,500 of the Protestant clergy in Germany sided with Adolph Hitler. About 2,500 opposed him. And roughly 15,000 took no stand at all. This was beyond belief to Dr. Zersen — that fifteen thousand pastors could turn their heads away and ignore Hitler’s crimes. After all, Germany was thought to be a Christian country!

The same thing happens all the time in this land. It was a rude awakening for many Americans when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. confronted us with the legacy of racial injustice so rampant in our land, some of which still continues today. How could it be so? We are a Christian people! Ironically, some of the most blatant injustices were happening in the so-called Bible Belt section of our country, and they were being perpetrated by some of our citizens who would dub themselves as eminently law-abiding.

You can be law-abiding and be miles away from the heart of Christ. Christians are called to go beyond simply obeying the law. That’s especially important for us to see during this season of Lent. The people who crucified Jesus were the most law abiding in their society. But obeying the law is never

enough. Nevertheless, followers of Jesus do seek to keep the law. We are, for the most part, law-abiding citizens.

BUT WE UNDERSTAND THAT THERE IS A GREATER LAW EVEN THAN THE TEN COMMANDMENTS AND THAT IS THE LAW OF CHRIST'S LOVE.

“A new command I give you,” says Jesus in John 13:34, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” That is the law that is written on the Christian's heart! However, few of us can be said to live that law out fully.

R. Kent Hughes in his book *The Sermon on the Mount* tells a story about a woman, a friend of his wife, who committed herself to that kind of love. This woman's family had come home from the mission field “...and had rented a rather nice townhouse — at least it was very nice compared to what they'd had on the mission field.” His wife's friend is a very creative person, Hughes says, and did a wonderful job of decorating the place, and they settled in.

“Only one thing was wrong,” says Hughes, “the family who moved in next door. They turned the front yard into a desert, broke the windows out of their house, were always using foul language, urinated in the front yard, and generally caused havoc in the neighborhood. The final straw was when one of the boys climbed into our friends' yard and threw a whole can of orange paint over the patio walls.

“My wife's friend was really angry,” says Hughes, “She did not like her neighbors. She was not happy with the Lord for putting her where He had put her.” However, “realizing that her heart was not right, she got down on her knees and said, ‘Lord, you know that I do not like these people at all. God, help me to love them.’”

“She did not feel any different, but she resolved to exercise love. She baked her neighbors a pie and took it to them, thus beginning a caring relationship.” Here's what was interesting according to Hughes. “Those neighbors did not change, but she did. She had begun to love them. When those neighbors moved away, she wept.” Kent Hughes concludes this remarkable story with these words, “What an example of intelligent, volitional love that says, ‘I will love by the grace of Christ within me.’”

Are we capable of such love? I suspect that none of us are by our own volition, but with God's help we all can be. The people we seek to love may never return that love. That's who they are. But who are we? We are followers of the man from Galilee who loved so much that He gave His life on our behalf.

That's more than simply being law-abiding. That's living with the law written on your heart.

It's like a man who moved into a small town and bought a little house across the street from the railroad tracks. Every morning he noticed an elderly lady walking along the tracks picking up something and putting it into a bag that she carried. The man got curious about this lady and so he went to the corner “Mom & Pop” grocery store that had been there forever and asked the owner about her. “Oh, that's the widow Jacobs,” he said. “Every day she comes half way across town to pick up the coal that is spilled on the tracks when the early morning train runs through town.”

“But there hasn't been a steam locomotive using coal on these tracks for years,” replied the new resident.

“That’s right,” said the store owner. “When the steam train stopped running, old Mr. Simpson who runs the hardware store was concerned that the widow Jacobs would no longer have coal to heat and cook with. He knew she was too proud to take charity, so he decided to get up early every morning, take a bag of coal and drop it along the tracks. The widow Jacobs still thinks the steam train runs by here every morning. I think old Mr. Simpson has been doing that for about 5 years now.”

We don’t know for certain that old Mr. Simpson abided by all the laws of his community. I suspect he did. But we know he didn’t stop there. He followed the example of the Master. He had the most important law of all written on his heart. It is the law of Christ’s love. “A new command I give you,” said Jesus, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.”

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