

Sermon: Year A, Proper 22

Texts: Exodus 20:1-11

Philippians 3:4b-14

Matthew 21:33-46

This morning's texts seem to be at odds. The reading from Matthew appears to be a direct refutation of the reading from Exodus, and yet we answer them both by affirming that they are, both, the word of God – which puts us in a predicament.

On the one hand, we are given the Law, and it comes to us in the very specific form of commandments. There is little ambiguity here. Commandments demand obedience. They set the primary standards against which all our secondary decisions are measured. What is right and what is good, what is warranted and what is edifying, what is admirable and honorable and just and worthy – all these assessments are made in accord with what the Law requires of us. Human life depends on this structure, as does every attempt at civilization.

On the other hand, Jesus' parable in Matthew seems to undermine everything that Moses had established. It's a story of ever-increasing wrongdoing. Hired workers decide to steal a vineyard away from its owner. It's bad enough that they intend to embezzle all the profits, but to do so they also end up beating the servants sent to claim the harvest. As more are sent, the violence increases to murder, and the owner finally resolves to send his own son, under the presumption that he, at least, will be treated with respect. And yet, with ever greater greed, the tenants kill the son as well.

Masterfully, Jesus finishes the story with a question – about consequences. And those around him reply immediately with the certainty of law. The owner, they retort, will exact full retribution. The tenants will get their due. They will be put out and will suffer in punishment a miserable death – in accord with Exodus, and in accord with the standards set at Sinai, as determined by God's word given to Moses.

But Jesus counters his listeners, claiming that exactly the opposite is the case. He mentions no punishment and offers no suggestion of correction or retaliation. The parable is left unfinished. Jesus only states that the kingdom of heaven will be built beginning with the least likely persons – the stone the builders rejected will become the chief cornerstone. And, all the more, he adds that this very kingdom is being taken away from the guardians of the Law, from the very persons who believe that they are upholding the essential commands of God. The Law itself is being superceded.

Which text do we trust then: Law or Gospel? This is a question that has haunted Christianity from the very beginning, and the history of the church shows sweeping variations in how these texts are read.

Some resolutely plant their feet in the primacy of the Law, and the story they tell centers on sin and the need of redemption. God is a stern judge and salvation is a narrow door. We live our lives under the threat of eternal condemnation, and only if we make the Gospel itself a law –

believing the right things, holding to the right principles, acting in upright ways, and being vigilant in faith – will we earn the favor of God.

Others claim that the Gospel has simply disposed of the Law. Standards are wrongful impositions. We may simply be who we are or whoever we'd like to be because God loves us anyway. We have no continuing responsibilities, no duties that demand our best. God's forgiveness is so extensive and so overwhelming that it erases the very sense of offense in the first place.

Law or Gospel: the tension between these two texts seems to send us spinning off in opposite directions. And this isn't just an esoteric Christian speculation. Look at our public life and our culture. They mirror the same destructive polarities. Politically, economically, socially, our most prominent debates have been aligned according to this Law/Gospel divide. If there isn't order, there's only chaos. If you don't grant equality across every identifiable spectrum, you're a tyrant. If you're not for me (and we all know what follows), you're against me. Whatever happened to reaching across the aisle. Whatever happened to the marvelous Episcopal middle way. It seems to have been left behind as we've been swept up in ideologies of the right and the left, the progressive and the conservative, in caricatures of aloof intellectuals and beer swilling average Joes. Law or Gospel comes in many differing forms.

The biggest problem here comes in the smallest word – the word “or”. By it, we create a disjunction between Law and Gospel, when the more appropriate relation is conjunction – holding these two visions together rather than splitting them apart. Martin Luther saw this dramatically and clearly, and much of the Reformation was built on his reclaiming of Law *and* Gospel as full complements of one another rather than opposites.

Understood in conjunction, the Law does not negate the Gospel. It retains its function of setting the standards by which we determine what is right and wrong. But, as the Apostle Paul already knew, the Law does not make us good. Most of all, it reveals where we fail – so that we may come to see the true measure of God, who extends to us forgiveness, even where the Law is most condemning. The Law shows us the depth of the Gospel.

In like manner, the Gospel does not negate the Law. It does not free us from obligations, as if, in the realm of forgiveness there are no longer any enduring distinctions between evil and good – as if it's all erased anyway. Total freedom from obligation is simply nihilism – the emptiness we feel when nothing matters. Instead, the Gospel complements the Law. It affords us a new and broader freedom to act on behalf of others for renewal and change, even in the midst of strident disagreement. Bound first by a sense of reconciliation that has no limits, the Gospel commands us to endure our divisions together, until, by grace, a greater good and a more perfect Law is mutually attained.

According to Luther, as human beings we are both sinful and justified, condemnable and forgiven. We live under the claim of Law and Gospel co-extensively. “Simul justus et peccator,” he said. We are at the same time guilty and beloved, without remainder, without imbalance.

This is not just a matter of semantics or word play. Changing one word changes the world. If Law and Gospel are complementary, then all our partisan ideologies become illegitimate, all our righteous indignation collapses because none of us can claim to stand on ground high enough to condescend to others. If all of us share some portion of guilt, then none of us can strike at others with the fury of an innocence betrayed or trampled. There are no pure victims. There are no pure villains. Law and Gospel apply to each and to all. And what results from this is the re-establishment of middle ground, both difficult and blessed. The defining word does not divide but binds us: not “or” but “and”. And if we truly take this to heart, we can be people of tremendous courage and reconciliation... catalysts to what seems nearly impossible to us now – actual, consistent and honest bipartisanship.

Yesterday, in a packed church in Philadelphia, our Presiding Bishop made an official apology on behalf of the whole church for the church’s collusion in the slave trade, nearly two hundred years ago. It was, she said, an apology made too late – as all apologies are. And it would be too easy to think of her statement in the divisive terms of our times, as once again raising the specter of division: black against white, slave against free, those oppressed calling for retribution against their oppressors. True repentance, however, doesn’t end with accusation on one side and remorse on the other. It culminates with all involved gathering together around God’s table in order to remember Christ’s embrace of all who betrayed him and to imagine, then, that same peace being shared now and deep into our future. Repentance is neither just contrition nor reason for retribution. It’s rather the long but hopeful work of changing how we see the world and how, seeing it differently, through the strength of promise, we may steadily transform our divisions into surprising union.

Amid all the debates of the week, few noticed this act, but precisely here Martin Luther’s old words suddenly become prescient and powerful for us – we will sing them shortly. But listen to them now, carefully and acutely. They sound with new relevance.

And though this world with devils filled,  
should threaten to undo us;  
we will not fear, for God hath willed  
his truth to triumph through us;  
the prince of darkness grim,  
we tremble not for him;  
his rage we can endure,  
for lo! his doom is sure,  
*one little word shall fell him.*

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen