

1 June, 2008  
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Well, this morning's readings present us with an interesting look at grace and law and covenant. I think that it's really an important thing to be reminded periodically that while we claim to be a nation of laws, we are not a church of law, but grace. So it's a difficult, sometimes, enterprise to really come to terms with that.

Oftentimes we find ourselves slipping off into this age-old struggle about having to do what's right according to law - because it's "the law" - to get into heaven. It has nothing to do with the law. Nothing. How many times have you heard said, and maybe said yourself, "Oh! You broke one of the Ten Commandments. You're going to hell."

### **Wrong.**

It's not about law. The Genesis story that we have here about Noah, it's an amazing thing. There are still people looking around trying to find that ark, and claim to have - frozen in the glaciers at the top of Mt. Ararat. And there are still people trying to prove one way or another how it might have happened, this story. This geologic catastrophe might have been the foundation for it.

That's a fool's errand. That's not the point. It's talking about covenant. God was pretty disgusted with what had become of the Creation. That initial covenant with Creation had just fallen apart. So here was this man Noah and his wife and his sons and his sons' wives, and they seemed to be all right. So God decides to save a little 'starter'. [He] instructed them to build this barge and to take two of every animal, and how many times did Lisa have to say the word 'creeping' in that reading? There are so many things that should have been left behind! Like *mosquitoes*. And *banana slugs*. Anyway, I digress...

So, you know the story: Wipes the slate clean, comes up New Covenant. New Covenant. Rainbow in the sky, New Covenant. Let's try this again, several times - later, in the Mosaic Covenants (Moses and the commandments, all that stuff). There have been several along the way.

And now here we are under yet another covenant. Through Christ Jesus. And in that covenant it's not about the law. It's not performance-based. It is relationship.

Re-lation-ship.

All that law stuff? Forget about it. Just forget about it. Ten Commandments? Thanks, appreciate it - training wheels. All of that stuff is training wheels.

That's what Paul goes on and on about. Over and over - him having been a Pharisee, who were so steeped in the law and they felt like theirs was like a crisis cult, because they were so desperate. Their whole culture and their religion was under the jackboot

of the Romans. They had a puppet government in charge, the synagogue, the temple in collusion with the Romans. The whole thing was coming down around their ears and they said, 'If we keep the law even better, then we will be back in God's good graces.'

And then Paul has this conversion experience, this massive epiphany where he comes to realize it's *not* about the law. That all the law in the world is not going to save him.

When Jesus is talking here to these folks and says, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven..." That's just the sort of thing he's talking about. He takes it even further, see. Not only is it not about law, it's not about religiosity. All these things that he's predicting, you might say. "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! Did we not prophesy in your name? We cast out demons in your name and do many deeds of power in your name and go to church every Sunday and sit on all those committees and serve three terms on the vestry... Didn't we do all that **stuff**?' " And he says, "Yeah, but I don't know you."

*Man.* And all this time we've been thinking it was on how busy we were down at 22<sup>nd</sup> and Louisiana that was going to get in God's good graces! (That was Margaret Lopic who laughed...) Even Margaret cannot buy her way into heaven! And she knows full well that this activity that we are involved in –whether it's the keeping of the law or showing up for mass or whatever it is that we are involved in – is the fruit of this relationship. It's an outgrowth. It's the by-product. It's not the thing, it's the by-product. It's the result of that relationship.

And it's transformative when we come to realize that. Because then we're free! We're not worrying. "Is this the right thing? Did I make the right decision? Oh, my gosh, look at all the shades of gray in this law here. Oh gee..." It frees us.

You hear people sometimes say, "When were you saved?" An Anglican will tell you, "On Calvary, two thousand years ago." That's when you were saved. It's not anything that you've done, be it baptism, be it saying a sinner's prayer or any of those. Those things did not save you. It's what led to those things that did. It's the relationship with God. It's cracking ourselves open so that we can be in relationship with God. And all these folks that seem to gather around, be attracted to one another who have done that sort of thing.

It's not what we do. It's how we are. With each other and with God. When Jesus talks about doing the will of God, Jesus is not talking about doing all of the Levitical law or the Ten Commandments or any of that stuff. What he's talking about is loving the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. Period. That's it. The rest is details.

And we probably, most of us, need the law as the training wheels to help us learn to keep upright. At this stage, that's what we're about. That stuff is training wheels. And it helps us to find our way, but there is a point in which you have to take those things off

or you will be forever infantilized. You will never come to maturity as long as we do things because it's "in the law" or we don't do things because it's against the law.

We all know those little cliché stories about the man stealing bread to feed his hungry family. And if you ask a thousand people if what he did was wrong and should he go to jail, you get a variety of opinions. But I say that that's the sort of thing – is it a crime to survive? To do what is necessary if it does no harm? Maybe it's against the laws of the land, but I think that God give us a bye in those sorts of things. That's the kind of thing I'm talking about.

There's an amazing story on the front page of the paper today. The Longview paper (I understand there are others).

It's about a local man by the name of Dan Smith. Viet Nam veteran, lost a leg, had been wrestling with... well, he said, "The war is not over for me." Just to let you know where he's at.

He had gone back to Viet Nam on a couple of occasions on humanitarian trips. Digging wells, doing work, trying to ease his troubled soul. And on one of those trips, he was in a village near the Cambodian border and saw a black man. Not common. He started up a little bit of a conversation and the gist of it was that when he told this man, who said that his name was Buller, that he was going to be going home soon, the man said, "I wish I could go home." And then when he wanted to take a picture, he [Buller] just kind of disappeared. I don't mean went up in a puff of smoke, but he... took off.

So this began this obsession for Mr. Smith to find out who this person is and in the process found that there had been an American by the name of McKinley Nolan who had deserted. It was thought that he had gone to join the V.C. and had produced messages trying to get other black soldiers to desert and to join with him. And this man [Smith] was determined to find McKenzie Nolan and bring him to justice for what he had done.

It's a pretty long story. It's going to be continued tomorrow, but what struck me about this story was that Dan Smith went to Texas where Nolan was from, and met his family there. [He] told them what his plan was. His intention was to see that McKinley Nolan was put in prison. But over the course of his visit with this family, his heart was healed. And rather than having revenge and making sure that this man [Nolan] served time in prison, he wanted to return him to his family.

This was all taking place in about 1967 when this man [Nolan] disappeared. It's been a long time. His wife has never divorced and remarried, his son is grown. He [Smith] somehow, through relationship, moved from this place of law to a place of forgiveness and compassion.

I think that that really sums up what this whole process seems to be about. How we may well need law to show us the way and to teach us the difference between right and

wrong, to help us learn to be mature. But there is a point at which it comes to relationship. When Jesus said that he didn't know those who had done all the nice religious stuff, the word there that's translated is the same word as that kind of intimate knowing that's referred to elsewhere in scripture. Sexual knowing. *Intimate* knowing. It's more than just acquaintance-ship. It's not talking about sex, but it's talking about a deeper sort of knowing, an intimacy of knowing. And through that, we come to a place of wholeness and healing where compassion and forgiveness become the primary movers and motivators and shakers. Shapers of our actions.

Because it's not through keeping the law and being pious that we become known by God. It's by being in relationship. Ever-deepening relationship. And it may involve, at different stages of the way, all of these things – law and spiritual practices and what may appear on the surface to be nothing more than empty piety when viewed by others. It may well be all steps along the way toward this place of maturity in which we are both known by God and know God. And we come to this place of knowing and being known by constant exposure to one another at ever-deepening levels.

I think of these graduates now who are 'commencing', who are going out from their places of learning, and how they have been taught – especially those who are graduating high school. They have been under **the law** to a greater or lesser degree. But they have been under the law and pretty soon, whether they go into the workforce or they go off to college, they are having the training wheels removed. Now they've gradually been coming off over time, but pretty soon they're going to disappear altogether. And then they'll see.

They may find their own way and it may not be the same way that their parents would want them to find. It may not look just like the way their parents' same fledging process looked, but it's about that incorporation of those deepest principles that parental law, civil and religious law are trying to point to. A life lived in community. A life lived in relationship.

May we all see ourselves daily being fledged into this life of faith in which we have come to be known and to know that we are children of God.

Amen.