

February 16, 2020**Law and the Commandments****Matthew 5:21—37**

Martin Luther had his own version of the Bible. The fact is that Luther “edited” his version of the Bible, placing books like James and Hebrews at the end because he questioned whether they really fit with the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Luther originally had a hard time with God, because he believed God to be demanding, a God of justice but not of mercy. He tried every way he knew to live up to the demands of this severe God—even literally beating himself at times. Finally, he discovered that salvation was by grace alone, by faith alone. Through the lens of that discovery, he began to view the New Testament as “gospel” and the demands of the Hebrew Bible as “law.” For Luther, it was crucial that Jesus had come to set us free from the “law.” And he “wrote” this perspective into his translation of the Bible by placing books he didn’t care for at the end. But Luther wasn’t the first or the last to try to “edit” the Bible. I think the real problem for us is that what they did on paper, we do in fact. We simply omit those portions of the Bible from actual use. I think this tends to apply especially to the “law” with its demands. We know that one is not saved by keeping the law and can think of no other reason why one should try to do it.

But that’s not consistent with our lesson from Deuteronomy for today. The basis for the commandments was the relationship God wanted with the people of Israel, called the “covenant.” Throughout the Hebrew Bible, God called the people to commit themselves wholeheartedly to this relationship. Where he says that to live in covenant with God means “to commit oneself wholly to God and to God’s way.” The commandments were viewed as a gift that made it possible for the people to align their lives with God’s intention for their life. In the context of this relationship, the purpose of the

commandments was to define human life in terms of loving God. “The one who keeps covenant expects Israel to keep the covenant commandments; the one who loves Israel expects this people to love wholeheartedly in return.” Our lesson from Deuteronomy says it this way: “choosing life” means “obeying the commandments of the LORD your God ... by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments”. It means “loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him”. It is said that it is through the Ten Commandments that we find “the fullness of life, the depth of love, and the meaning of our own humanity.”

Some might object that in the “Old Testament” people had to earn their salvation through obedience, while we’ve been set free from all that by Jesus Christ. Not only does that not do justice to what we’ve heard from the Hebrew Bible today, it also doesn’t accurately reflect our Gospel lesson. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ approach to the commandments is not to set them aside, but to make them a central part of what it means “hold fast” to God! Clinton McCann compares what Jesus says here with Psalm 119. He says, “Jesus ... sought to extend the Torah to represent God’s sovereign claim upon all of human life. What Jesus teaches brings to expression the ultimate purpose of God for his people expressed in Torah. They insist that these verses do not “offer us Jesus’ interpretation of the law,” because although “the Torah supplies him with a point of departure,” his demands surpass the Torah. Therefore, for Jesus, “strict obedience to the commandments of the Torah is not enough” because “obedience to rules, even to the Torah, does not automatically produce the spirit that Jesus requires of those who follow him,” i.e., love. I’m not sure Davies and Allison who wrote the above are saying anything different from others on this, they’re just saying it more forcefully. For Jesus it means that we not only don’t kill one another, we also avoid hatred and anger. Instead we practice

reconciliation in our relationships. For Jesus keeping the commands means that we not only avoid promiscuity, we also relate to others with pure hearts. For Jesus, obeying God means that we avoid all the ways people use to circumvent the truth and practice simple, straightforward honesty. In other words, for Jesus, obeying God is not just a matter of what we do, it's something that comes from the heart.

All this may sound very confusing. I think many Christians over the ages have been confused about what they should do with the Hebrew Bible, especially the Law and its commandments. Our lessons for today, like many other Scriptures, teach us that the purpose for the commandments has always been to call people like you and me into a relationship with God. It is a special kind of relationship, one defined by sincere love and trust, and by obedience that comes from the heart. That's right--all the "thou shalt not's" and the demands that go beyond the way everybody else lives have always been about our relationship with God! God has worked through Prophets and Apostles and Saints and Sages throughout the centuries from Abraham to today with one goal in mind. And that goal is to lead you and me into a relationship with him in which we respond to what he has done for us with love that comes from our hearts. When we have that kind of relationship that comes from the heart, we can do no less than make every effort to practice the way of life defined in Scripture as "walking in God's ways."

I am ending this with a poem "You Have Heard it Said"

This poem aims to make one point from the Gospel reading: although Jesus uses their well-known phrases, he asks his hearers to recognize that holiness of life requires more than the commonplace understandings of those phrases. This poem uses the structure of the sayings in the Gospel to examine well-known proverbial sayings with the

same intent. The Jesus Way requires of us more than commonplace thoughts and responses. The piece doesn't claim to be great poetry. It is simply an attempt to reframe the challenge of Jesus using contemporary commonplace sayings.

You have heard it was said

Charity begins at home

Your care confined by what you know.

But I say to you love is not bound, it stretches your will,
enlarging your soul, confounding constraint and making you bleed.

For if you care alone for those near, what have you learnt but to subsist?

You have heard it was said

You can't teach an old dog new tricks

Your learning of life dulled by your age.

But I say to you the tree grows until its dying day,
living is learning, experience and the new knocking on each other,
making discipleship true.

For if you know only yesterday's answer,
where will you meet the risen Christ anew?

You have heard it was said

A friend in need is a friend indeed

Your action spurred by trouble or demand.

But I say to you an ally anticipates, knows before the alarm

the urge to empathy, the need to act and intervene for the good.

For if you wait for the call — hesitant, reserved --

can the name 'friend' be a true title to you?

You have heard it was said

If it ain't broke, don't fix it

Your imagination held tight by what is.

But I say to you a better way there may be sight isn't vision,

what's comfortable can be a sham, how things are excludes too much.

For if you let what is, be all where do you see

the Kingdom's changing call?

You have heard it was said

A little of what you fancy does you good

Your cravings directing what you feel whole.

But I say to you your fancy is often a fraud, indulgent, self-satisfying,

pretending to control a reason that's false, to fool your own self.

For if you measure your pleasure by only what appeals

whose will is done?

You have heard it was said

Blood is thicker than water

Ties of birth determine who's kin.

But I say to you kin is belonging that's given by God,

ties that bind are as wide as sovereign grace.

For if you make your clan sole affinity where then is God's plan

for inclusion that heals?

You have heard it was said

Paddle your own canoe

All that matters is the self that is you.

But I say to you the self so insistent was made in the encounter of others,

their touch and their care made you —you, created your space to occupy.

For if you seek just what satisfies you where will you be in

making others other?

You have heard it was said

Children should be seen and not heard

For they have yet to earn a place in the world.

But I say to you now is the time to live and respect,

not tomorrow and not yet,

joy is for now it's not an adult's sole inheritance.

For if you deny the children voices

how may you know the things that you've lost?

You have heard it was said

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder

For I am the arbitrator of what appeals.

But I say to you the patterns of life so vast is in more than you can see,

empathy, knowing and delight, so much bigger, grander,

than one take of what's in sight.

For if you see only what suits you now, where's the space into which

your soul may grow?

You have heard it was said

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

A golden rule that encompasses all.

But I say to you that is the meaning of prophets and Law,

and not a stroke, not a comma,

of them shall be undone, but the grace that I bring gives more ...

For if your righteousness gives what you would get

does it not make a bargain of what can only be free?

Here is the notion,

Here is the action

In the realm where grace is all:

Not commonplace, not easy,

Not 'as was said.'

Nor what's agreeable,

Just the enigma of a God

With an earthly frame

Calling us on --

Not to abolish but to fulfil

And to seek in all things

The Divine will.

So, I ask...

What does this leave you thinking?

Pastor Karen Williams