

Love in Stone and Anger

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

3rd Sunday in Lent

Texts: Exodus 20:1-17; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, John 2:13-22

We remember today the Sisseton and Wahpeton bands of the Dakota nation, who cared for the land and water right here in the place we call Rochester. All these elements of earth were precious to them, considered to be their relatives: brother, sister, mother.

SCRIPTURE READING Exodus 20:1-17

The covenant of the law: God gives Moses and the newly freed Hebrew people the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. These are not, as we sometimes think, rules prohibiting the immoral behavior of individuals, but a comprehensive program for life in community.

Then God spoke all these words: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

GOSPEL READING John 2:13-22

Today we make a quick shift from Mark's Gospel to John's. Here we are given a rare glimpse of Jesus' anger. This is one of the few stories common to all four Gospels.

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple he found people selling cattle, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. Making a whip of cords, he drove all of them out of the temple, both the sheep and the cattle. He also poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. He told those who were selling the doves, "Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me." The Jews then said to him, "What sign can you show us for doing

this?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years, and will you raise it up in three days?" But he was speaking of the temple of his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken.

Some of you may remember the comic actor W. C. Fields. The story is told that when he was sick and nearing the end of his life, his wife came into his hospital room and found him reading the Bible. She said, "W. C., what are you doing? I thought you didn't believe any of that stuff." Fields shot back, "Looking for loopholes, my dear. Looking for loopholes!"

We are not just in the middle of Lent, we're in the middle of tax season, and like W. C., lots of people are frantically looking for loopholes in the tax laws. Every law has loopholes, right? Some laws, like the old Jim Crow laws, are just wicked and need to be struck down. That's why we have courts. But even good laws can be abused, misused, used for harm as well as for good. Like so many things in life, in law good and evil can get mixed up together. People will always find ways to wiggle out of laws they don't care to follow. Other people purposely and publicly disobey laws they believe to be unjust. It's called civil disobedience. If they are arrested, their defense is that they are obeying a higher law - God's.

Jesus did that. We'll look at his story in a minute. But do you ever wonder, why do we have laws in the first place? We read the Ten Commandments this morning. In my childhood church, they were read out loud at the beginning of every worship service. It was scary. I heard them as warning: God knows what you do even in secret. And I heard them as threat: disobey, and be damned. I now know that's not how God intended them. A Presbyterian Wise Women's Bible study calls them Love Carved in Stone. The Ten Commandments are God's gift, God's covenant promise of perfection - not perfection as toeing an impossible line, but the perfection of wholeness, peace, and thriving for every person. To follow God's law is to build communities full of music and laughter and sharing food and caring for each other. Look deeply and you will see those wonderful good things there, not just what's forbidden.

So why do people still look for loopholes? I think we do it to justify our own desires, and protect our own interests. God's law says, "You shall not steal." Our government found loopholes to break the treaty made with the Dakota people who lived here on this land; in fact, they built the loopholes in. Our country took it without paying for it. What law was broken? And who broke it?

God's law says, "You shall not murder." A year ago this week, Breonna Taylor was killed in her own apartment by police. What law was broken? A couple of years ago, in our state, Philando Castille was killed by police for trying to show them that he had a legal permit for the gun he owned. What law was broken? Last May, on the weekend we honor those who died defending our country, George Floyd was killed by police for allegedly passing a

counterfeit bill. What law was broken? This week the man who killed George Floyd goes on trial. If you follow the trial, try to keep alert for loopholes, and who is using them. Human law has loopholes. God's law can be abused, but it has no loopholes.

When God's laws get broken, people get broken. Communities get broken. And broken people break laws. Ideally, human laws mirror God's laws. But all laws can be twisted and abused. We are fortunate that the laws of our country give us the legal right to raise voices and even fists in protest of injustice. The people of Myanmar do not. Dozens were killed by military coup leaders this past week alone. Neither US law or God's law can justify breaking into stores to steal or breaking down the doors of Congress to threaten elected legislators, lawmakers. But we do have the right--and perhaps the responsibility--to be angry over abuses of the law. To be silent in the face of evil is evil, too. Some people, many of them deeply faithful Christians, may feel called to express righteous anger over unjust laws in acts of civil disobedience. But no one should go there without deep prayer and soul-searching.

Jesus modeled civil disobedience in the second chapter of John. We're quite sure this really happened because all four of the Gospel writers tell the story. The others put it at the end; John puts it at the beginning. Right away, Jesus is at odds with the authorities. And right away the authorities start looking for loopholes in the law to justify killing him.

Jesus' protest took place in the temple, the heart of Jewish worship, the place they believed God was fully present. Old Testament law (though *not* the 10 Commandments) called for animal sacrifice at different times for different reasons: a sin offering to show remorse and repentance, or a thank offering for the birth of a baby. Jesus' parents went to the Temple after he was born; they sacrificed doves, not a lamb, since they were poor. Sacrifice was a reminder that all life comes from God, and must be treated reverently. People who came from a long distance to worship couldn't bring animals with them, so they purchased them on site. There was profit to be made there. They also had to pay a Temple tax; they had to exchange the common Roman currency for Jewish money. Roman coins had pictures of the Roman emperor. He was considered a god so it violated Jewish law to bring them into God's holy place. There's a profit to be made in changing money, too.

What Jesus saw happening was this: God's people were getting ripped off by animal sellers and money changers. These entrepreneurs weren't *breaking* the law exactly but they were *twisting* it to take advantage of people for personal gain; as my father used to say, they were "kneeling at the trough of greed." What Jesus did next was done in anger, though not in a fit of temper. It was a planned and considered protest. He found cords. He braided them into a whip. That takes time and thought. He walked in among the cattle and the sheep and began driving them out of the forecourt of the Temple, a huge open space. Have you ever tried to drive a herd of cattle or sheep anywhere? I haven't but I've seen it done. It takes some strategy. And there's something they're bound to leave behind. On the floor. Brown.

Aromatic. Then Jesus takes the tables full of Jewish and Roman coins and overturns them. Throws them on the floor. Right in the...yup. Money and manure all mixed up.

Well. Very few things in life are all good or all bad. Money can be a good thing, but don't try to fertilize your fields with it. For that you need - the other thing. Manure is great for gardens, but not so good for economic transactions. You see where I'm going where this? Laws are good and necessary, when they are fair and just. Protesting unfairness is good, too, and sometimes necessary: not in a fit of temper, but as a considered response to impossible situations. Yes, things can get complicated. Then we have to ask the question, what is most likely to result in equal flourishing, equal opportunity, equal blessing for all people? This is what God intended in giving the law, love carved in stone.

We see Jesus' zeal here: love expressed through anger. We see his passionate, unswerving devotion to God's law, God's worship, God's truth. All are good gifts for people everywhere. Jesus took this one step further: he looked within himself and saw the temple not made with hands. His own body was the temple that would be destroyed by loopholes in the law used by people who saw him as a threat. Yes, even though he was a brown-skinned member of an oppressed people, the powers of the day were afraid of him because what he sought and taught and lived was God's justice.

This is the good news: God's justice is not about penalties and getting even. God's justice presses the questions: What should life be? Why isn't it? How can we fix it? How can we restore our families, our communities, our nation, our world to wholeness?

We start small. We start where we are, admitting we are powerless alone, but stronger together. We need to be fed. We come to God's table of mercy, which is right there wherever you are, to take into our own bodies the supper offered -- and commanded -- by Jesus himself. There are no loopholes to be found. Just the free and simple gift of God's grace for you today.

Prayers God of justice, God of mercy, write your law on our hearts and let it flow out through our actions, that our whole human community may thrive together. And when we see any law twisted to oppress or punish your children unfairly, give us the courage to stand up and say so.

As more vaccines become available, we pray for their equitable distribution to all people. As more states open businesses and lay down mask mandates, we pray for common sense to prevail in behavior. And as an historic trial opens in our state, we pray for wisdom and calm to guide all involved, within the courtroom and outside it.

All people are precious to you, but some are especially precious to us: we ask especially for

your tender care to surround those who journey toward the end of life All these things we ask
in Jesus' name and trusting in your mercy. Amen