

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 13, 2011
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Scriptures: Deuteronomy 30:15–20, Psalm 119:1-8, 1 Corinthians 3:1–9, Matthew 5:21-37

L Is for Life

Have you ever noticed the introductory paragraph that we print in italics at the top of the bulletin every Sunday? They are usually very helpful to understand what's going on in the liturgy and in the readings for the day. Each individual reading is also accompanied by a little paragraph in italics. These are not meant to be read as part of the lesson, but rather they are little explanations of what the text is about. By the way, I don't write those, so I'm not taking credit for them. They come as part of the resources pastors use to prepare for Sunday service.

Anyway, the synopsis for today is particularly helpful. It says, "Jesus' instructions to the crowd reveal a pattern of behavior that honors both God and the neighbor, resulting in life and health for the whole community. We, too, are invited to embrace these commandments, not out of fear of retribution, but because God has promised that to do so means life for us." Is there anything more I should add? You know what happens? Often, when I find good stuff like that, I get concerned that if I say anything else I'll ruin the message. I mean, those two sentences are simple, clear, and basically correct. So why would I want to say anything else? Oh well, I guess better come up with something. Somehow I have to justify why I'm being installed as pastor of the congregation today.

But really, that is the purpose of the Law of God as we find it in the books of Moses and quoted today in the gospel from Jesus' lips. The Law is as much the will of God as Jesus becoming human to inhabit among us. Not will in the sense of "this is what I want you to do and this is what you should not do", but in the sense of "this is what I wish and hope for you and for all of creation. The will of God is for life to thrive. The will of God is that all people and all of creation may prosper and flourish. The will of God should not be interpreted as a bunch of do's and don'ts but as an expression of divine blessing for all living things.

Do you remember what I said last week about relationships? Don't worry if you don't, the only reason I do is because I looked it up when I was preparing this sermon. Anyway, we said that the law commanding to fast was not about the ritual of not eating—at least not only about that—but about building up relationships among the people. Whenever you are talking about God you are talking about relationships. We can't be in relationship with God if we have broken relationships with our neighbor. So, God said in the words of Isaiah, this is the fast that I want, that you help those who are in need. You see, when we want to refer to God, we need to refer to our neighbor. Didn't we also say a few weeks ago that to see the face of God you have to stoop low? We don't look upwards but sideways. We identify the face of God on the faces of our neighbor. And that should be the same way in which we interpret the Law of God. You see, we think the law is about,

well, being *legal* – you know, it's about doing the right thing, staying in the lines, keeping your nose clean. But the law is actually concerned with relationships.

Take the Ten Commandments for example. We've known this from our very earliest confirmation class. The first three are about our relationship with God. The rest, all seven of them, are about our relationships with each other. That in itself should tell you where God is calling us to put our emphasis. The whole law is actually a way of pointing us toward ways to honor those with whom we are in relationship. Is not about doing this and not doing that. That's why we get so caught up in keeping the law for the mere sake of it. But that's not what Jesus is saying. Instead, Jesus wants us to be able to see more than just what is obvious. And to help us understand that theirs is more than meets the eye, he uses a "You heard, now hear this" kind of pattern.

It goes more or less like this. "You have heard that it was said you shall not murder" So you go and think to yourself, "Okay, good; I've never murder anyone, so that's checked. Next!" Oh, but you are not expecting to get off the hook so easily, are you? Jesus says that it is not enough not taking someone's life, you also have to protect and honor the lives of others. Because when you are angry, or you insult, or you call names to someone else, you attempt against the life of that other person. Now, isn't that a very radical interpretation of the law? We immediately realize that we fail; that we do not fulfill it. Still, the purpose is not to show whether we are able or not, but to call us to be mindful of the life and the relationship we should be striving to hold and treasure. The radical interpretation brought by Jesus is a challenge for us to imagine what it would actually be like to live in a world where we honor each other as persons who are truly blessed and beloved of God. It's not enough to avoid murder. You also have to treat each other with respect, not letting yourself fly off the handle in anger because that, too, demeans and diminishes God's children. Martin Luther built up his catechism on that understanding. For Luther, not bearing false witness isn't simply about avoiding lying. Not to lie also means that you will do everything within your power to see that your neighbor is listened to and respected. In such a way you tend to the communal relationship that makes us all children of God.

There is a legal dimension to the law; no doubt about it. We know it from the laws of our society. In our legal system, you don't kill someone simply because it is illegal to do so. If you do, you risk getting some kind of punishment. Either you end up in jail, or you can even lose your own life. But when it comes to God's law, there's more than that. We are being called to regard each other as God regards us. We are being called to see in the law a greater purpose: to support the life and health of our neighbor. Life in the kingdom of God is not described by what you are allowed to do and what you are not allowed to do, but by a desire to hold the welfare of those around us close to our hearts. "L" is for "Law." Scratch that; "L" is for "Life." Amen.