

Rebuilding the Community of Faith

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church on November 8, 1992. Scripture Lessons: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

In the Spring of 1991, about a year before Murphy Brown had her celebrated baby, Murphy was faced with a dilemma. She had to make a choice between two men. One man was her former husband to whom she had been married for about week. He had come back and demanded, "Murphy, make a commitment." And the other man, with whom she was having a passionate affair said to her, "Murphy, you don't want to settle down into the boring routine of marriage do you?" Murphy didn't know what to do. And the season ended that spring by Murphy Brown saying to some sympathetic colleagues, "Why doesn't life come with an instruction manual?"

Maybe life does come with an instruction manual that we've failed to read. Maybe there's a book that can help us make good decisions even about who to marry and who not to marry. Christians believe that God has given us a manual. God has given us laws and commandments, decrees and statutes. God hasn't sent us into the world without giving us some guidance.

That's what the Jews discovered. The story which Nehemiah relates in our Scripture lesson is set four-hundred and fifty years before the birth of Jesus. The Jews had returned from captivity in Babylon some ninety years before. The Temple had been rebuilt. The walls of the city of Jerusalem had been rebuilt. But what had not been rebuilt and what was most in need of repair was their knowledge and understanding of the Law of God. God had given them an instruction manual but they hadn't heard it read for a long time.

So, in our Scripture lesson for this morning, we find all the people gathered to hear the Law of God being read for the first time in generations. Both men and women were there along with all the children who were old enough to understand. The younger ones had gone off to junior church and the nursery. The book of the law was brought out with great ceremony and opened so the people could see. And when it was opened, the people stood up. And Ezra read for hours.

1. Now, notice first, that the people told Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses. It was their idea, not the idea of the religious leaders to read the Law. What kind of weird people demands the law to be read? My guess is that that they felt a great vacuum in their lives about what was right and wrong. When everything is acceptable, when everything is relative, when there are no guidelines then life can become intolerable. Life is difficult when there are no norms, no guidelines (Vannorsdall, *The Lutheran Series of the Protestant Hour*, June 26, 1983)."

In our legitimate fear of legalism we parents, we elders, we Christians have often resisted hearing the Law of God or teaching it. My generation has resisted rules and laws and guidelines. But Jesus said, "I have not come to destroy the law." He said, "Whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven." Our own Reformed and Presbyterian heritage stresses the positive value of the Law of God. One of the longest chapters in John Calvin's, Institutes of the Christian Religion, is an exposition of the Law of God. In our Reformed Catechisms major emphasis is place on practical application of the Law of God to our lives.

For example, notice how the Heidelberg Catechism, written in the 16th Century,

interpreted the Eighth Commandment, "Thou shalt not steal."

"(God) forbids not only the theft and robbery which civil authorities punish, but God also labels as theft all wicked tricks and schemes by which we seek to get for ourselves our neighbor's goods, whether by force or under the pretext of right, such as false weights and measures, deceptive advertising or merchandising, counterfeit money, exorbitant interest, or any other means forbidden by God. He also forbids all greed and misuse and waste of his gifts."

In our contemporary emphasis on God's grace and forgiveness, I want our church to teach God's law in Sunday School, worship, and in our youth groups. The majority of Americans say they believe the Bible is the word of God. Nevertheless, only about half of all Protestants can name as many as four of the Ten Commandments and less than half of all Americans say they turn first to the Scriptures for guidance in times of crisis. I want you to know and understand the Ten Commandments. I want our church to give clear guidance as to what is God's will and law. I want to steer our church between the Charybdis of fundamentalist legalism where all the answers are given in detail, and the Scylla of permissiveness where all is situational and relative. I want a congregation that wants to know God's law.

2. Notice, secondly, that the law of God was read and interpreted, not in the sacred precincts of the Temple, but in the public square. "(Ezra) read from (the law) facing the square before the Water Gate... (and) the Levites helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places." The Law of God is not meant to regulate only our private religious lives. The Law of God gives direction to every area of life. It gives guidance as to such things as labor-management relations, health care issues, abortion, mercy killing, environmental pollution, interest rates, advertising, the use of money and possessions, and even who we should or shouldn't marry. There's no area of life that the Law of God doesn't address.

The law of God needs to be interpreted anew in every generation. It's always

difficult, however, to decide whether preachers, politicians or lay-people are judging events in the light of Scripture or using the Bible to sanctify their own political convictions. Both slave-owners and abolitionists found comfort for their causes in the Bible, as did civil-rights marchers and segregationists in the 1960s. Abraham Lincoln, perhaps the most Biblically literate of our presidents recognized this. During the Civil War, Lincoln reminded both sides that "in great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one must be wrong." In the Civil War, he added, "it is quite possible the God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party." Humbled by that fact, we Christians, nevertheless, continue to strive to understand and interpret God's will for our public and private life.

3. Thirdly, notice the response of the people to the reading of the Law of God. "All the people wept when they heard the words of the law." Why did they weep? We're not told, but maybe one reason was because they knew that God cared enough about them to lay down the law. Last week we had dinner with my brother and sister in New Castle. We reminisced, as we always do when we get together, about our mom and dad who played such a powerful role in shaping our beliefs and values. There was laughter, but there were also tears as we remembered how mom and dad cared enough about us to teach us right from wrong. When my mother washed out my mouth with soap and water for taking the Lord's name in vain, she was showing me that she cared even about the words I used. I'm thankful that mom and dad cared enough to teach me right from wrong. And that's how God is. God cares so much about us that he gives us his law.

So I believe the Jews wept because they knew God cared enough about them to lay down the law, but I also think they wept because they knew they hadn't lived up to God's

expectations. They hadn't be faithful to their God. They hadn't worshiped God as he commanded. They hadn't followed God's law with respect to whom they married. They hadn't treated their workers fairly. They had coveted their neighbors possessions. They hadn't kept their promises to God or to their neighbors and so they wept.

Today, most of us no longer experience guilt in precisely the same way. We don't weep before God in remorse but we often experience guilt in the vague awareness that our lives have unfulfilled possibilities. We feel badly that we've been given possibilities by the Lord that we have badly used. We grieve and feel guilty that we haven't been good parents. We often feel guilty that we haven't been as successful in our careers as we had once hope. We often feel guilty that we haven't put the kind of energy into maintaining loving relationships as we should have (John Leith, Presbyterian Outlook, October 10, 1988). So when the Jews heard the Law of God they wept because they knew how much God cared about them and because they knew they hadn't lived up to God's expectations.

But Ezra and Nehemiah said to the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep... Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

They're telling us that God doesn't give us his law to break our spirits so that we grovel before him. When we've sinned the Lord Jesus Christ invites us to eat and drink with him. Jesus eats and drinks with sinners and that's something in which to rejoice. We can't atone for our sins. Christ has already paid for our sins. Forgiveness is not something we earn or deserve. The law isn't given to save us, it's given to point us to

the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ's body was broken for us. Christ's blood was shed for us, so that we can come joyfully to the feast of the Lord.

But their instructions also direct us to express our gratitude to God by remembering those who are poor and needy. "Send portions (of the food and drink) to those for whom nothing is prepared." That is, remember those who are hungry and poor. We have no right to feast on anything unless we share it. We have no right to share in the grace of God unless we share the gospel with friend, neighbor and enemy. We have no right to enjoy food and drink and home unless we share what we have with the poor and needy.

Now, let us who have heard the word of God never be satisfied with a faith that wants to hear only pleasant and sentimental things. Let each of us pray for a desire to listen to and understand the law of God. And let us seek to apply the law of God to every area of life, and not just the private and personal. And let those of us who have heard the word of God weep, knowing that God cares; weep knowing how we have disobeyed God's laws. But out of that weeping, let us turn to Christ and trust in him for forgiveness and strength to obey God's laws; and let our tears give birth to compassion for those who are poor and hungry.

"Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Let us pray: Teach us, O LORD, the way of your statutes, and we will observe it to the end. Give us understanding, that we may keep your law and observe it with our whole heart. Lead us in the path of your commandments, for we delight in it. Turn our hearts to your decrees, and not to selfish gain. This we pray through Christ our Lord. Amen.