

## The Law of the Lord

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on January 22, 1995, the third Sunday after Epiphany. Scripture Lessons: Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21.

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

In 1985 we gave my mother a Grandparent Book. We hoped that she would write down stories of her childhood in the early 1900s. When she filled in The Grandparent Book we gave her a spiral tablet and asked her to keep on writing. As a result we have the most wonderful stories of my mother's childhood memories of her parents and grandparents - stories that were passed on to her that go back as far as the early 1800s in Maine.

One of her stories describes her first job in a cracker factory in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where her father, a railroad carpenter, <sup>was from</sup> ~~were living with his family~~. The year was 1915. ~~Because of bouts with pneumonia and her family moving from town to town for work, my mother dropped out of school in fifth grade at the age~~ <sup>She was</sup> of 15. ~~She dropped out of school and started working.~~ She got paid 10 cents an hour, 10 hours a day, 6 days a week - a <sup>15</sup> ~~sixteen~~ year old girl. She had to be to work at seven in the morning.

"What I did most", she writes, "was take the cookies off the carriers as they ~~came down~~ and pack them in boxes. They were right out of the oven and we always had burned fingers. One day they made ginger snaps. If any of the cookies fell off the carrier on to the floor we picked them up and boxed them. The superintendent chewed tobacco and was always spitting on the floors. One day one of the carriers had a dead mouse roasted on a cookie. That was the days before

health and sanitation laws. I never ate ginger snaps again."

I tell you that story to let you know a little bit about what the "good old days" were like. No compulsory education. Fifteen year old girls working ten hours a day, six days a week, for 10 cents an hour. And no laws to protect the worker or the consumer.<sup>uncanny working conditions.</sup> Cookies picked off the floor covered with tobacco juice, a dead mouse baked on a cookie. That's one picture of what the good old days were like.

My mom was glad when laws were enacted that required young people to go to school until they were at least 16. She was glad when laws were enacted to guarantee a fair wage and better working conditions. She was glad for health laws<sup>^ sabbath</sup> that reduced the likelihood of opening up a box of cookies and biting into a dead mouse.<sup>or tobacco juice -</sup>

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It's easy for us to think of the law as bad. Especially in the Christian church where we contrast God's grace with God's law.<sup>we often think that</sup> Law is harsh and unloving. Grace is amazing and compassionate. But although the Bible plainly teaches that our worth in the sight of God is not based on our performance in keeping God's law - the Bible is also certain that God's law is good. The Psalmist writes, "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from comb.

By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

When you think of God’s Law do you have positive feelings? Or do you have negative feelings? Law is good. And when we begin to think that law is bad it affects our families, our communities and our nation. True - there are bad laws. Bad laws need to be changed. But one way we show love and compassion <sup>to our neighbors</sup> is by obeying the law - God’s law especially.

The story which Nehemiah relates is set in the sixth or fifth century before Christ. The Jews had returned, many of them, from captivity in Babylon. The walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, but what was most in need of repair was their understanding of the law of God. What made the Jews a nation, distinct from other nations, was their sense that their whole history revolved around the unseen Lord who had brought them out of Egypt, expected something of them, and rewarded or punished them according to their responsiveness to God’s laws. Obedience to God’s Laws was a way of showing love to God and neighbor.

So in the episode read from Nehemiah, we find all the people gathered in the street, opposite the water gate. Men and women were there. And older children were also there - all who were able to understand. A platform had been built, and Ezra the scribe stepped onto the platform, and the book of the law was brought and opened. The book of the law was brought out with ceremony - kind of like what we do on Christmas Eve and other special occasions when someone holding the Bible leads the procession into the sanctuary. And the book of the Law was opened everybody stood up, like we do when we read the Gospel lesson. And Ezra read for

three hours, until noon, and the Levites went among the people helping them to understand what was read. And when they heard the Law of God, the people wept.

Why did they weep? Why would the reading of the Law of God make them weep. We might wonder why they didn't fall asleep. But they wept when they heard the Law of God being read and explained to them. Why did they weep?

I think they wept, for one reason, because they were so happy. Just like my mother was happy when laws were enacted to protect the workers and the consumers and which required children to go to school. They wept because they were happy. The Law of the Lord revived their flagging spirits. When they heard the Law of God being read they felt - at last we know what's right and wrong - we know now how to love one another and how to love God.

I think they wept, for another reason, because they knew God cared. God cared enough about them to give them laws ~~and rules and precepts and ordinances and commands~~. God didn't leave them to themselves. In the days of the Judges, before Israel had a King, people did what was right in their own eyes and the land was filled with violence and bloodshed. When we do what is right in our own eyes - when each one of us becomes a law unto ourselves and decides for ourselves what is right and wrong there is moral anarchy- there is environmental anarchy. There is social anarchy. Law is good. And God's law is an expression of God's love for us. God cares for us.

Life is difficult when there are no norms. When there are no guidelines, life is hell. But what really comes through is that no one cares. So the people wept

because they knew that God care enought to give them guidelines and rules and laws. The God of Abraham, whom we know through Christ, has expectations for us.

I believe the people wept, for a third reason, because they were sad. They were sad because the law revealed to them how far off base they were. They had not loved God, nor had they loved their neighbors. The Law of God makes us weep too. The Law of God leads us to confess our sins. When we hear the law of God we pray, "Almighty and merciful God, we have erred and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our hearts. We have offended against your holy laws."

And when Jesus began his preaching ministry he read from the prophet Isaiah, "The Almighty has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release for the captives, the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to declare that the day of the Lord has arrived."

Those words should make us weep. Weep for joy. Weep because one has come to deliver us. We weep for joy for those Christ came to release and deliver us. We disobey God's law and, as a result, there is oppression, there is poverty, there are those who <sup>is</sup> have forfeited ~~the~~ their freedom. But thank God, Jesus has come to deliver us from the results that have come upon us for breaking God's laws. And we weep because God loves us enough, not only to give us laws, but to find a way to save us when we disobey them and bring disaster upon ourselves and our loved ones.

~~I don't believe that any of us know what's right or wrong instinctually. We~~

need to be told what is right and wrong. And I believe that we're living in a period of history where our culture and church have not given us very clear guidelines. Walter Brueggeman of Columbia Presbyterian Seminary recently said, "We may as well concede that we live, all of us, in a promiscuous, self-indulgent society which prizes autonomy." What is autonomy? Autonomy is the rule of self - when we submit to no law or rule but the rule "To thine own self be true." We've been left, largely, to ourselves to figure out on our own what is right and wrong. One of the most important things we can do for our children is to teach the Law of God beginning with the basics of the Ten Commandments. Someone has said the Ten Commandments, which are really a summary of God's law - the Ten Commandments could easily be called, "God's Ten Great Freedoms." God's law shows us how to live freely with one another. The Law of God is God's gracious will for us showing individuals, congregations and communities how to love one another and how to love God.

And what is at stake is not simply our personal salvation, our personal forgiveness, and our own personal relationship to God. What is at stake is how we live our lives together.

~~Let us pray:~~

Think of what life would be without laws - good laws - laws that regulate the work place, and our relations to one another in our communities. Yes some laws are bad & need to be changed ... but which would we be without laws - and which would we be without God's Law -