

The Dance of the Law

Matthew 5:17-26

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, (Feb. 16) 2020

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*For ritual allows those who cannot will themselves out of the secular to perform the spiritual, as dancing allows the tongue-tied man a ceremony of love.*

-Andre Dubus, "A Father's Story"

Our Scripture this morning is from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. All of Matthew's chapters 5, 6, and 7 is Jesus' core teaching of what it looks like to be the church, the band of Jesus' followers. This is who we are and what we do and what we don't do. Basic stuff that we are called to practice, practice, practice together until we master it. And this word from one who has been practicing it a long time – this takes a lifetime.

Matthew wrote his Gospel to a community of Jewish Christians who had been raised their entire lives on the law of Moses, the Torah. Jewish children were taught to ask their parents, "What is the meaning of the decrees and statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?" (Deut. 6:20), and the adults were to answer, "The LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for lasting good, so as to keep us alive" (Deut. 6:24).

In Judaism, the law is a blessing and the grace of God, the source of life. It is Torah, the Way. But the early church ran into some new problems. What if you were not a Jew and did not know the law but you had met the living God in Jesus Christ and were now a Christian? Most of the book of Acts is concerned with this

issue and there was a major gathering of church leaders in Jerusalem in Acts 15 to argue this out and discern God's will. Should Gentile Christians become Jews and then they could become Christian or could Gentiles become Christian without become Jewish?

Many people in the young church tried to resolve this issue by one of two diametrically opposed perspectives. One said that the Old Testament law is the law no matter what and in order to become a Christian one had to become a Jew first and observe the law. The other perspective said that now that Christ has come, the law no longer is to be observed, and everything is new.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus shows us, what our Anabaptist ancestors and Mennonite cousins call, the "third way." The law neither remains intact nor is it done away with, instead, it is fulfilled and transformed in Jesus Christ. Every aspect of the Old Testament is to be seen, interpreted, and lived out in the light of Christ.

New Testament scholar Tom Long uses the analogy of a searchlight and a laser beam. A searchlight scans the night sky. A relatively small source of light is passed through a great lens, which magnifies it into a powerful radiance that spreads more widely over the sky. A laser beam, on the other hand, takes the energy source in a concentrated form, and transforms it into razor-sharp intensity. The light of Christ is both a searchlight and a laser beam. When the law passes through Jesus Christ, his person and his teachings, it is both focused and enlarged, amplified and intensified. Each and every commandment is seen through Jesus Christ.

For example, in Matthew itself Jesus and his disciples get into trouble with the religious authorities over the sabbath observance (Matt. 12:1-14). On the sabbath, because they are hungry the disciples eat grain and shortly after, Jesus heals a man, both violations of the sabbath law. Jesus responds by reminding the religious authorities that behind the law stands the God who is merciful and just and wants human beings to be nourished and healed. As Jesus says in another place in Matthew (23:24), the religious authorities are missing the point. They're sticklers for the law; they're straining at gnats while swallowing camels (see Tom Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*, pp.52-54 for this introduction and exposition on the law and the Sermon on the Mount).

Jesus tells us over in John's Gospel (16:13) that the Holy Spirit will guide us to all truth. In other words, guided by the Holy Spirit, we are to read and interpret the law, the Bible, and our faith. Situations come along, contexts change, and unforeseen issues arise that are not explicitly talked about in the Bible and we need to interpret anew. Or because of Christ, we begin to see some things in the Bible in new ways, and we realize that we have been blind previously. Quick examples are such things as war and violence. In parts of the Old Testament, God sanctions violence and holy war but reading through the light of Christ, we see there are limits to war and violence, and in Christ, we are called to be peacemakers and love our enemies. Another example, slavery was a given in biblical days but over time, through Christ, we came to see that slavery was wrong. Or we know in the Bible that women were second class and were to be dependent and subservient to men in almost every way. But in Christ we now see that we have been wrong and that as the Apostle Paul was already beginning to see in Galatians, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

Let me be clear: When interpreting the Bible, or figuring out how to live as Christian, we always, and I mean always, start with Jesus. We start with Jesus and then by the light of Jesus Christ we look backward through the Old Testament and we look forward through the New Testament and forward across the centuries. But Jesus is the norm, our standard. We do not start with Leviticus or Deuteronomy. If you want to read the Bible through, start with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Don't start with Genesis. And specifically, start with Matthew 5-6-7.

Let me tell you another story about how the Bible interprets the Bible and therefore, how we learn to interpret the Bible. In Acts 8 Luke tells of the Ethiopian eunuch in his chariot riding from Jerusalem to Gaza. And he tells us that God sent Philip to speak to him.

He was an Ethiopian, which in that day and time was equivalent to saying he was from the end of the world. Ethiopia was far-off and distant. An Ethiopian was the ultimate foreigner. He looks different, his skin is dark, he speaks with a heavy accent, he eats strange foods, and observes strange customs.

And he was a eunuch. A eunuch is a man who either by accident or by surgery was rendered sexless. Often such persons found work serving rich and powerful women, especially working in palaces for the queen. Since they were sexless, they were considered to be trustworthy with no sexual interest in the queen they were serving or anyone else. They were not distracted but were devoted with single-minded loyalty. This particular eunuch Luke tells us was the chief of the treasury for Queen Candace. Such a man, in his own right, was rich and powerful.

And Luke also tells us that he had been up to Jerusalem to worship. Why? Why had he been up to Jerusalem? The Bible says in Deuteronomy 23:1 “The eunuch shall not be permitted in the assembly of the people of God.” The Bible, in Deuteronomy, is clear, the eunuch is not welcome, cannot be included, and is not to be included. That’s the law. He is a eunuch and he is a foreigner.

Yet he had been up to Jerusalem to worship. He had stood outside the wall of the Temple, listening, trying to see what was going on inside, trying to hear the hymns sung, trying to hear a word or two of the Bible read, asking people who came out, “What did they say in there? What happened today? Who is this God?”

Luke tells us that he was out on the road going home from Jerusalem, but he had stopped and was reading a Bible. And what he was reading was almost too good to be true. In Isaiah chapter 56 it says, “No longer let the foreigners say surely the Lord will separate one from his people. No longer let the eunuch say I am but a dry tree for thus says the Lord God. The days are coming when the eunuch, who hears my voice and obeys my law and keeps my covenant, I will give him a place in my house, and I will give him a name and it shall be to him as generation and generation and generation of children. Better than sons and daughters it shall be to the eunuch” (Is. 56: 3-5).

And he turns one page over to chapter 53 and reads, “As a lamb that’s led to slaughter, as a sheep before the shearer is dumb, he didn’t open his mouth. Who will declare his generation? Who is going to declare his generation? He was cut off out of the land of living. He had no children; he had no generation. He had no one to remember him. He had no one to carry his name. He was just cut off, killed without any children. Who’s going to declare justice for him?” (Is. 53:1-12).

And Philip comes up and asks, “Do you understand what you’re reading?” And the eunuch says, “No, I need some help. But I think I’ve found something important. Who is the prophet talking about?” (Note that he needed help in interpreting the Bible. We read in community. We read together and help each other understand what we’re reading, and it is why listen to what other Christians from across the centuries and around the globe have to say. It’s why we have Bible study together.)

And Philip said, “This is Jesus Isaiah was talking about. He was cut off without any children. He was led like sheep to slaughter. He had no other generations to keep his name.”

“It sounds like Jesus knew exactly what I experience. And what about this other verse over one page in Isaiah? It says that the eunuch who keeps the covenant will be included in God’s people. I know I’m just a eunuch and I know what it says in Deuteronomy. I know what the law says but here in Isaiah it says God will bless and remember and include the eunuch.”

And Luke tells us that they came upon some water and Philip baptized him right then and there. The eunuch became part of the church, the body of Christ. The law said, “No!” The prophets said, “Someday.” And in Acts, Luke tells us that in Christ “someday” became “today.” In Christ, all things become new. Eunuchs were included. Foreigners were included. This is the gospel. It is the law interpreted by way of the Holy Spirit, the light of the living Christ. This is how we interpret the Bible. It is a model for how we interpret our faith.

This is how I interpret the inclusion of LGBTQ folks in this church. Yes, there are places in the Bible where same gender sex is condemned. But using the model of the Ethiopian eunuch we just looked at in the book of Acts, and as the Apostle Paul said about Gentiles and Jews, “But now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.... So, then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God” (Ephesians 2:13,19).

Another, very different example about interpreting the law in our own day and in the wider world, this time from today's criminal courts. Attorney Noel Cooper tells me that in Angelina County, Shelby County, Rusk County and numerous other counties in Texas, they have what is called “Drug Court.” It is part of the regular District Court but meets one night a week under the District Court judge to specifically deal with non-violent drug offenses. Many of these cases are drug possession cases and rather than simply send the offender to prison, there are alternatives offered. If the drug offender will cooperate and work, there are options for mandatory (but free) counseling, support, and accountability like weekly drug testing, weekly reporting to the Drug Court and the judge, all under jurisdiction of the probation department. If the offender will work the program and show up and do what's asked and expected, passing all drug tests, at the end of the period of time determined by the court, then the drug offense charges will be dismissed. Noel Cooper, and other lawyers like Sean Hightower, believe it is time for us to have such a court in Nacogdoches. This is not about changing the law or going soft on crime. It is about returning again at the true purpose of the law: to decrease criminal behavior. The law's purpose is not to send more people to prison, especially non-violent offenders. It is to help us have a more drug free society. We need a Drug Court in Nacogdoches County.

Back to the Bible. Jeremiah foresaw the day when God would make a new covenant in which the law is written on the heart. Rather than being an external that is taught, Jeremiah says someday the law of God will become internalized and instinctive. Rather than rules we observe, it becomes who we are (Jer. 31:31-34).

This is why we practice, practice, practice the Sermon on the Mount Sunday after Sunday, day after day. We hope and pray that the Jesus Way, the Sermon on the Mount simply becomes who we are. We practice forgiveness and practice it some more until we begin to do it naturally. We practice loving service, and we practice not being fear-filled where we carry guns. We practice giving up hatred, bigotry, and suspicion of others and we learn to embrace and love others, most especially those we consider different. Because of Jesus Christ, we practice giving up building walls and start building bridges. Because of Jesus we feed the hungry and visit the sick.

And through Jesus Christ together we learn how to know God. We learn together how to pray and worship and sing. We practice over and over again until we begin to get the hang of it. Every Sunday we come together to practice ritual and liturgy.

Think of the analogy of dance, we practice the steps together until they become second nature. An old friend from years ago said, “The worst thing you can do while you’re dancing is to think about it.” In other words, we learn and practice, practice, practice and one day it just happens – two people become one and the dance has become natural and the movement across the dance floor becomes more filled with joy and grace than we could ever imagined before.

[STAN BOBO AND CINDY BERTIN DEMONSTRATE DANCE]

The late short story writer Andre Dubus wrote, “For ritual allows those who cannot will themselves out of the secular to perform the spiritual, as dancing allows the tongue-tied man a ceremony of love.”

We come to church wanting to know God and follow Jesus, but we don’t know how, and we come in dragging all kinds of baggage. Together we start learning the steps. Together we learn to leave our baggage at the altar and together we listen to Jesus as he comes to us and says, “Would you like to dance?”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God  
Mother of us all. Amen.