

MOUNTAIN VIEWS - LAW
A SERMON BASED ON MATTHEW 5:17-20
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 2018
10:00 a.m.

Judge Roy Moore was the chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court
back in the early 2000's.

He waged and lost a stubborn fight,
to install and keep the 10 commandments in his courthouse.

When they were ordered removed,
he put them into storage.

But so as not to lose his last word,
he would take them on tour to his public appearances.

It was no small task.

The ten commandments had been carved onto a cubical monument
about four foot square.

It was made of solid granite.

The monument with its 10 commandments was 5,280 pounds.

The commandments had to be lifted by crane onto a flatbed truck.

Joshua Green, writing in the Atlantic Monthly,
noted that whenever the truck returned to Alabama,
"a 57-foot yellow I-beam crane
that spans the ceiling of the Clark Memorials warehouse
drops down to retrieve the Rock from its chariot,
and even this one -- a five-ton crane/ --
buckles visibly under the weight."

The 10 commandments.

Heavy, weighty, oppressive.

We can be guilty of thinking about the law of God in this way.

If you have grown up a citizen of church land,

you likely learned or at least heard about, a lot of rules.

Rules and laws that didn't always make sense.

Rules and laws that felt oppressive and restrictive,

and perhaps even prescriptive and at times nonsensical.

You may have grown up in, or knew a family,

where on Sunday there could be no tv, no sports, no playing,

not even the throwing of a ball,

because it was the Sabbath.

You could take long walks.

You could read. You could take a nap.

You may have lived in the part of church-land

where the rules meant you were not allowed

to dance, or go to movies.

or use playing cards,

unless the cards were UNO or Dutch Blitz.

Those were okay.

Frantically stealing others cards from others was acceptable.

Euchre and crazy eights was not.

You may have lived in a part of churchland

where, if you were female you had better wear

a skirt or dress to church.

And if you were male, you had better remove your hat.

Even today you will come across people who

when hearing that you go to church

will suddenly become uncomfortable

with the beer or wine they have in hand.

The laws for the citizens of churchland can feel arbitrary and restrictive.

I remember in my teens, it was the early 80' and the

first edition of the movie Footloose was released.

It was a movie about a city kid played by Kevin Bacon

who moves to a small town.

The preacher has a tight grip on the place.

Rock and roll music and dancing have been banned.

The church and its oppressive rules were holding

the high schoolers down.

The city kid, played by Kevin Bacon finds a loophole in the rules

and takes the high school dance into the neighbouring county.

At the barn in the neighbouring county, the high school kids,

until now, repressed and oppressed by the church,

or at least by the uptight preacher,

can finally dance.

Of course, Kevin Bacon's character falls for the preacher's daughter,

who, for never having danced before,

does surprisingly well.

The movie made the point that the rules
were oppressive and stifling and restrictive.
With the rules lifted, they could finally breathe, they could move,
they could dance.

With these types of stories as our context,
Jesus sounds every bit the killjoy in today's passage.
Another small town preacher trying to control the sheep.
'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets;
I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.
For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear,
not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen,
will by any means disappear from the Law
until everything is accomplished.

Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands
and teaches others accordingly
will be called least in the kingdom of heaven,
but whoever practises and teaches these commands
will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

For I tell you that unless your righteousness

surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law,
you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

He makes the preacher in Footloose sound like a pushover in comparison.

The law.

Heavy, weighty, oppressive.

Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic priest who lived in the 1500's.

Because of the work he did with his reforms in the church

we have the protest, Protestant, movement

and the Lutheran branch of the church's family tree.

Luther had lived his life in fear of a just God,

a God who would deal justly

in punishing the unjust and the lawbreakers.

Who could live if there was no one just, no one righteous?

All the rules.

The law.

He did his best as a priest.

Prayers seven times a day,

pilgrimages, confession, asceticism,

Luther did them all and yet couldn't find peace.

Luther followed the rules so intensely,

even the other priests told him to lighten up.

In his continued prayer and study over the Scriptures,

he had a moment where he "got it".

His insight and moment turned the church on its ear.

What he got eventually grew into the Protestant movement.

He wrote,

'The justice of God

is that righteousness

by which

through grace and sheer mercy

God justifies us through faith.

God makes atonement for us.'

God does it for us. God does the justifying.

What he came to understand was that

God pays our penalty, takes our punishment.

God's justice is carried out in Christ, by Christ.

We are given the status of righteous, holy,

not because we keep all the laws,

because God simply gives it to us,

the status of righteous, through Christ.

In Christ, we are redeemed.

By grace we are saved.

Salvation is a gift to be received.

Having a faith that brings peace,

comes not from keeping the law perfectly,

comes not from trying to be good, or at least good enough,

a faith that brings peace,

is a faith that receives righteousness through grace.

It is one of the most famous Bible verses.

Ephesians 2:8 says,

“It is by grace you have been saved,

through faith,

and this not from yourselves,

it is the gift of God.”

It comes as a gift.

The body of Christ broken for you.

The blood of Christ shed for you.

Saved by grace.

Saved not by your ability to get it right,

because sometimes we can get it so wrong.

Saved not by the wrongs you haven't done.

‘Haven't killed anyone, not as bad as that guy – I'm good.’

Saved - not by your own goodness,

because you can never be good enough

to stand before a holy God and say, I deserve your love.

I've earned it.

I have kept all the laws.

We are saved by grace. We need grace.

Luther says when he came to the realization

that only grace would save him,

only by the acceptance of God's grace in Christ,

he said,

'I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors,
into paradise.

The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning.

If you have a true faith that Christ is your Saviour,

then at once you have a gracious God,

for faith leads you in and opens up God's heart and will

that you should see pure grace and overflowing love.'

Luther's faith came alive with trust in Christ.

It is grace to brings us to God.

Which is why Jesus sounding worse than a Footloose preacher

saying things like 'I have come to fulfill the law!

Not the least stroke of a pen will disappear from it.

Any one who sets aside the least law

will be least in the kingdom!

Saying things like,

'Unless your righteousness surpasses

that of the Pharisees,

which is the religious pro league,

you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.'

Saying things like that sounds like Jesus is just

installing a crane

so we can try and lift what is heavy, weighty and oppressive.

But it is the same Jesus who says,

Come to me you who are weary and heavy burdened
and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.

I am gentle and humble in heart.

You will find rest for your souls.

My yoke is easy.

My burden is light.

So then, why not abolish the law instead?

Why not set the people free to dance?

Why not let people, now saved by grace,

be free to do as they please?

Why would Jesus say he is the fulfillment of the law?

The apostle Paul does a little theological work in Romans 6

to help us understand this.

There he asks the question,

‘Well if grace is a gift, and costs us nothing,

shall we go on sinning

so that we can receive even more grace?’

Why even worry about the law?

This belief manifests in the thinking,

it doesn’t matter what I do,

God will forgive me anyway.

It shows up in the behaviours where we compromise on

honesty, and truth, and integrity,

because we have equated God’s grace,

with indulgence,

God’s forgiveness, with lack of consequence.

Paul says

‘Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus

were baptized into his death?’

This is so we can live a new life.

The old self was crucified with him,

died with him

so that we are no longer slaves to sin.”

No longer slaves.

No longer struggling under the shackles of trying to be perfect

like Luther was attempting,

but neither so lazy to think that there could be no change,

no transformation, no growth toward being good, holy, other.

I can't remember if I read it somewhere,

or whether it surprised me in my own thinking,

but there was an insight about the law in the Bible,

that when I first considered it, was a bit of a serendipity for me.

It was a pivot point in my thinking.

It had to do with the 10 Commandments, those most famous of the laws.

But it wasn't so much the 10 Commandments themselves.

It was where they happened in the story.

Do you remember when did the Israelites

received the 10 Commandments?

Was it before or after they left Egypt?

Was it before or after they were delivered from slavery?

God delivered them from slavery first.

Deliverance was a gift.

Their freedom was not something they earned or deserved.

God delivered them.

In Exodus 20 he said,

'I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt,
who delivered you from the land of slavery.'

It was grace.

It was after they were set free that he gave them the 10 commandments.

It was in their place of freedom that he gave the law.

You shall have no other gods before me.

Keep the Sabbath.

Honour your father and mother.

You shall not

murder, commit adultery, steal, bear false witness, covet.

Grace brought them out of slavery.

The Law would keep them out of slavery.

Grace frees us.

God's law keeps us free.

Paul says count yourself dead to sin.

Don't let sin reign in your mortal bodies so you obey its evil desires.

Don't offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness.

Offer yourself to God as those who have been brought from death
to life.

Offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.

Sin shall no longer be your master.

You are not trapped in a heavy weight of oppression when you know and
understand God's law,

which says nothing about going to movies by the way.

You need to know your material and the difference between

what is God's law

and what is a Footloose preacher's law.

The Law, following Jesus, following his teaching,
is a path, not to limit you,
not to restrict your rights, your choices, your freedom,
instead it shows you how to stay out of slavery,
how to dwell in that place of grace,
how to stay free.
Jesus says I have come to fulfill the law.

Some will abuse God's grace.

Some will think, "What I do doesn't matter,
because God will forgive me anyway.

Philip Yancey calls it 'grace abuse'.

Grace abuse can leave us lost again.

Grace abused can take us back to slavery.

In Romans, Paul says, 'You are slaves to the one you obey.'

Don't go on sinning thinking grace will increase.

Don't abuse grace, understand that while grace sets you free.

Following the commands of God,

the teaching of Jesus,

staying with the way,
holding to the truth,
pursuing the righteous life,

Pursuing a godly, Christ-like,
a holy life,
that is what will keep you free.

God is a God who brings freedom.

But freedom, and being off-leash are not the same thing.

For freedom to remain,

it requires that you know what to do with it.

It is difficult to leave slavery.

It is a major challenge and a major success to break free of addiction.

Freedom from addiction is a hard won victory.

It is precious and worthy guarding and protecting.

Freedom requires that you know what to do to guard that freedom.

It is difficult to leave slavery.

Ask the person in debt.

Making the minimum payment on the credit card bill,

will only see the bill get even larger

as interest takes over and debt becomes the slave master.

For freedom to remain,

it requires you know what to do with it.

Freedom doesn't mean being off-leash.

Freedom, the fulfillment of freedom,

is Jesus.

With the law, with Jesus, the fulfillment of the law

God has shown his people what to do with their freedom,

and he has taught them how to stay free.

God's intent for you,

the life of Christian faith,

is not a life of enslavement,

of religious rules and regulations and punishments and measures.

And if you come across people like that,

you can be pretty sure they don't get it.

God doesn't enslave.

God delivers from slavery.

God doesn't steal freedom.

God grants freedom.

Jesus later said.

I am the truth, and the truth will set you free.

What will you do with your freedom?

Simply going off-leash could leave you muddy,

covered in burrs and

smelling like something you don't want to touch.

But with Jesus and in Jesus,

his teaching, his model, his example and his path

we have a prescription and constitution for freedom,

the means for staying free,

and for holding onto the status of righteous

given to us in grace.

Follow Jesus and you will be a holy nation.

God's treasured possession.

You will be what Jesus called salt and light,

You will be counter-culture freedom fighters,

in a world that allows itself to be enslaved to so much.

Following the law that is fulfilled in Jesus

you will called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Amen.