

May 21 Drawing Near to God (through God's grace, not through the law) James 4:8 Romans 3:20-24

The tent comes down – May 21, 2017 Ringling and Barnum and Bailey Circus closes. The circus folds; it is no longer. Do we mourn when the circus closes? When a long career comes to an end? Do we mourn when the need for change confronts us? Do we resist change?

We live in a chaotic time, change is moving so rapidly we feel we can't keep up. Letter writing becomes email, which becomes texts which becomes twitter and now snapchat. The messages we send to one another have become shorter and less permanent. Isn't the premise of snapchat, that what is posted, a picture or a message, will be deleted after a certain, rather short, period of time. Even the names we use for our messages emphasize impermanence, brevity: Snapchat, Instagram.

We live in a chaotic time and we are really uncomfortable. We don't know what to expect. We just want things to be the way they've always been; or the way they used to be. "Make the church great again" might be a slogan that calls to us: Let's go back to where everything and everyone had a place, and they stayed in their place. Just prior to this morning's service, I was talking about the church with the metal number plate on each pew. In the early 1900s, members of that church would "buy" their pew: they would contribute an amount to the church for the right to sit in that pew that year. The pew was their pew; no one else could sit there without permission.

Living in a chaotic time is not unlike what the Jews of Jesus' day might have thought. Life was difficult for the Jews – Roman occupation; Roman taxes, Roman governors, Roman soldiers enforcing Roman rules. In the midst of this chaotic life, they thought, we at least have the law that Moses gave us. The law tells us what to do and how to do it. The law is constant. If we just are obedient to the law, the rest of life will be tolerable. The Law was theirs, it helped them structure their lives beyond Roman occupation. They were God's chosen people, after all, "Hear O Israel the Lord your 1

God is One." God had promised, through the prophets over and over again, "I will be their God and they will be my people."

Strict obedience to the law enabled the Israelites to feel closer to God, YHWH, El Shaddai, El Elyon, the great I AM, by whatever name the Lord was called.

The story of the Old Testament is the story of the Israelites, the Jews, worshipping God, then falling away and worshipping false gods, like Baal, of God allowing other kings/nations to rule them, of the Jews pleading to God for deliverance, and of God hearing their pleas and restoring them to relationship. It is a story of turning away from God, then turning back—drawing near—to God. And God responded when they drew near.

The law, first given to Moses, was given renewed emphasis in the time of Nehemiah and Ezra, as the Jews returned from exile in Babylon. Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. The priest Ezra rebuilt the observance of their faith. There is the account of the people standing for a whole day, listening to the reading of the Torah, the law, and weeping.

Do we yearn for the law? Perhaps the law and laws that we find in the Old Testament offer us stability, predictability, a comfort zone. If we know all the laws and if we obey all the laws, God will approve of us. God will love us, we think.

I've mentioned my granddaughters Emerson and Rowan. Last Friday as the two girls talked about which movie they wanted to watch during quiet time, I reminded them of how well they had played together the previous week. As we talked about the behavior I expected from them, Rowan began listing what was expected: be kind, be patient, cooperate, be gentle (sounds like the fruit of the Spirit!). But then she quickly moved to listing all of the behavior don'ts:

Don't scream, don't fight, don't hit, don't bite, the list continued for another 10 or so "don'ts"

I wondered why was it so much easier to list the "don'ts"—and be very specific in the don'ts she listed—and so much harder for her to list the "do's," which also were much more general. The girls know that in order to gain approval to watch a movie, they have to obey 2

all the rules. BUT, they aren't perfect, so you can guess what happens to many of those rules!

The tent comes down; the circus closes. And some say, "So what?! The circus is outdated, it's no longer relevant." And in some ways, they may be right. Times do change; laws change.

Have you noticed you can drive 75 mph on Highway 131 from Grand Rapids north, and on most of Highway 127 from Clare to Lansing, and on some other divided highways—a total of 600 miles speeding from one place to another in Michigan.

I don't drive 75 mph – I didn't drive 75 mph in Nebraska where I-80 is relatively straight and relatively flat for most of its 440 miles across the state. I may be one to lament that some changes just don't seem desirable.

But laws do change.

And do we really uphold the idea of obedience to the law? Just as the Jews discovered, perfect obedience to the law isn't possible. How many of us find ways to cut corners, to park where we're not legally supposed to park for example. Or perhaps to "fudge" on our income taxes. The law, no matter how good it is, cannot guarantee good behavior. At best it can keep us from not being bad. God wants something more from us. God wants our hearts. God wants our integrity. God wants our willingness to be obedient whether or not there is a law that says we are to be obedient. It isn't enough to not be bad. We are called to something beyond ourselves, to be different and to make a difference.

Jesus brought a better way. And the religious leaders of his day didn't seem to understand his teachings, especially when what he said AND DID broke religious law. He let his disciples "harvest" grain on the Sabbath to feed themselves—prohibited work. He healed people on the Sabbath—prohibited work. He did not always perform the ritual of handwashing before eating. Jesus taught women as well as men (although church art doesn't show this!) – not a particularly Jewish law-thing to do.

Jesus brought a better way. He took all the laws—the Torah laws and the thousands of explanatory laws the scribes wrote to help people follow Torah law--and gathered them in to two commandments:

Love the Lord your God

Love your neighbor as yourself

What Jesus taught, these two commandments, is both easier and harder than being obedient to all those laws found in the Old Testament. What Jesus taught supersedes the laws found in the Old Testament. We are not people of the law. We are the people of Christ. There is a difference.

That difference became more and more obvious as the believers in the first century attempted to identify themselves. Were they Jews who happened to follow a new Rabbi, Jesus? Jews first, Rabbi Jesus followers second? If so, then all males had to be circumcised, according to Jewish law.

But Paul said, No, Gentiles do not have to be circumcised before they can be brought into the kingdom of heaven here on earth. This was a major controversy in the first century church. If believers were Jews first, then people of the Way (later called Christians) had to continue following all the Jewish laws. But Jesus had come to fulfill the law; He said so himself, as we have read in Matthew 5:17-20. Jesus had come to satisfy all the requirements of the law for us. As Paul wrote in Galatians 5:6 – For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything: the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

The challenge for us is to discern which of the Jewish laws are evidence of Jesus' two commandments: Love God, Love Others. Which of all those Torah laws need to be brought forward? Do we still believe we should not eat pork? Do we still need to observe the three festivals God required (Exodus 23:14-19): festival of the unleavened bread, festival of harvest (first fruits), festival of ingathering at the end of the year?

Paul writes about the law and faith in several passages as recorded in the New Testament.

- ◆ Romans 7:4,6 In the same way my friends, you have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead in order that we may bear fruit for God...But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that 4

we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.

--The law was needed to show us what we were doing wrong

But through Jesus' death and resurrection, we have died to our sinful ways and now have new life

- ◆ Galatians 2:16 Yet we know that a person is not justified by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And now we have come to believe in Christ Jesus so that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law  
"Justified" – restored to relationship with God; found/made acceptable; cleansed...

There are several more passages but let's look back to Romans 3:20-24 that we read earlier.

For no human being will be justified in his sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ, for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

So how do we discern what teachings we are to follow? What is our guide in determining which laws are still applicable and which are not? I would suggest that ultimately we must rely on Jesus' teachings and actions: Love God, Love Others, as God's Holy Spirit guides us.

The church will be great again: but it won't look like what many of us think a great church looks like. The American Christian church of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s didn't look anything like the 1<sup>st</sup> century churches such as Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, Colossae, Laodicea, Sardis or any of the others. Those were house churches, small gatherings for the most part. Those churches existed in a hostile culture: believers still had to do business in the market place, live among those who not only didn't believe in Jesus but opposed those who did. The megachurch, viewed as the ultimate Christian church success story today, would have been unthinkable to first century

Christians. Yes, Peter preached to crowds of thousands, in the book of Acts, but there is no evidence those crowds became a single church, meeting every first day of the week.

The church will be great again when we, the followers of Christ, live as Jesus taught us to live. Rather than turning to one or more of the many laws, our lives need to be guided by the LAW as Jesus explained it.

Love God

Love Others

Love others: We are to go out, beyond the walls of this church, not stay put and expect people to come to us within the church.

Love others: Every action we take, every word we speak, must be guided by the measuring stick:

Does this action, does this word hurt others: does it diminish their value as human beings? Does it relegate them to a category of "less than" – less important than those people we approve of, agree with? Less Christian than I am?

If this action, this word hurts others, we have saddened God

If you can't love your brother whom you have seen, how can you love God whom you haven't seen? 1 John 4:20

William Barclay, writing in Daily Celebration, a book of daily devotions, describes the relationship of D.L. (Dwight) Moody, who founded Moody Bible Institute and Henry Drummond. In today's language, we would call Moody a staunch conservative. We would describe Drummond, who accepted a modern scientific view of universe and welcomed developments in biblical scholarship, as "liberal"

Some of Moody's followers were very suspicious of Drummond. Moody sought to ease their concerns when he said, "Henry Drummond is a scholar. I am not; I wish I were. But this I know, that I can only hope to spend eternity with Henry Drummond."

Barclay continues to emphasize the importance of living out the love of Christ. In 1851 Stephen Colwell authored a book whose title ended "Theology Without Humanity, Protestantism Without Christianity." Colwell observed there were people those whose orthodoxy could not be challenged—they could recite scripture, Christian history and Christian practices but who observed their beliefs with an "almost complete lovelessness."

According to Colwell these people were more concerned about “smelling out heresy” than helping human need. They claimed the right to sit in judgment on the faith and the belief of all others. Barclay concluded that day’s devotion about connecting people to God with these words: “What does win people is a Henry Drummond in whom others catch a glimpse of the love of Jesus Christ.”

Philip Yancey, a well-read Christian author defines grace, God’s grace, for us this way: “Grace means....There is nothing you can do to make God love you more and there is nothing you can do to make God love you less.” God wouldn’t love us any more if we could observe every single Torah law. AND God doesn’t love us any less because we don’t observe all those laws!

The tent comes down, the circus closes. For its time, the circus provided entertainment in a way not matched by other local or traveling shows.

The tent comes down; the law has served its primary purpose: to get people—the created—to recognize their need to connect with God—the Creator. And yet, we cannot earn God’s love through sacrifice or obedience to the law.

Now we look to Jesus Christ to connect us with God. What God required—a sacrifice--God provided: Jesus came as the fulfillment of the law. Jesus has paid the price for our sins, our choices. Through Christ we have become children of God.

Now we are called to live, drawing near to God,  
but not by elevating those Torah laws as the way to God.  
Now we are called to live, drawing near to God in gratitude  
Now we are called to live, drawing near to God, by accepting God’s mercy and grace.  
Now we are called to live, drawing near to God by showing our gratitude through following Jesus’ example: Love God, Love others.  
Now we are called to live, drawing near to God through love, loving as God loves.