

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Year B

RCL



Jeremiah 31:31-34

Psalm 119:9-16

John 12:20-33

The Collect

The Collect

Almighty God, you alone can bring into order the unruly wills and affections of sinners: Grant your people grace to love what you command and desire what you promise; that, among the swift and varied changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

John 12:20-33

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

“Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this

reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die.

SERMON

Being a Christian is a journey, not an event. It's passage and process and not always linear. Distractions and side trips, even getting lost for a time, are to be expected. This might surprise you, but I have been a religious person in the proper sense for only 20 years or so, 12 of them with you. Prior to that, I was a sort of lukewarm Christian, doing churchy things because I was raised that way. even though the things I was being taught made little sense to me, and no wonder! The New Testament was presented to me as a teaching of inclusion, informing us to love our neighbor, (even those who we considered to be our enemies!) while the Old Testament taught exclusion from the community and cruel treatment of law breakers. The Old and New Testaments were then knit together, ignoring the different perspectives which each represented, into a single teaching that

went something like this: love God and your country, don't break any of the Ten Commandments (at least none of them we deemed to be important), go to church and when you die, you won't go to hell. Many, many Christians still cling to this idea, perhaps even some of you. I'd like to suggest that this view of the religious life makes life as a Christian both easier and harder than it really is. Easier because it requires only adherence to a law code without personal involvement in the welfare of your brothers and sisters, and harder because no one can perfectly follow the law, as any of us who have run a traffic light that was um...a little pink can attest. Furthermore, the law code which we understood in the 1950's and 60's was severely attenuated. For instance, the Commandment is "To hallow G-d's name¹" but we were allowed (and still are) to exclaim, "Oh God!"

¹ Lev. 22:32

when we are frustrated with a situation. We just couldn't follow "God" with the "D" word. Also, we didn't have to follow those laws we didn't agree with, or those of which we were unaware. We just had to follow those that "everybody knows" you should follow. Eventually, I went palms up and simply withdrew from any connection with the church. That could have been tragic, but it was really the beginning of my journey.

In college and young adulthood I actually became a bit of an enemy to the church, just as did another hiker on the journey, the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul. I began at the beginning of the journey – the law. My first career was in the law, first as a cop, then a misdemeanor prosecutor, and finally as the felony prosecutor for our county. A journey doesn't enrich you unless you pay attention. I had to move through the law to move beyond it. I worked hard to punish those who violated the law,

just as did Paul.

I can attest that such a course is a satisfying path to self-righteousness. The first covenant, the law code, advised, “Obey my laws or something bad will happen to you.” People being people, we modified that understanding to the much more satisfying, “Obey my laws or I get to do something bad to you.” Being in the position of one who catches and punishes “the bad guys” grants permission to view yourself as “the good guy”. Until his experience on the road to Damascus, that was Paul’s understanding, and he followed it with a vengeance. Then something changed, for me and for Paul.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as

to righteousness under the law, blameless.

Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith.²

Paul and I found that neither of us could find righteousness of our own within the law. God's purpose cannot be contained in a law code. God's law must become a part of our most innermost being, just as Jeremiah predicted 700 years before Jesus.

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

This is the journey every Christian must take. In a

² Phillipians 3:4b-6

surprising way, it parallels the way we learned from our parents how we are to live with one another in community. From the first, we are told,

“Don’t hit your brother or I’m going to bust your butt.”

“Laws are laws, rules are rules and if you don’t obey them, I’m going to make you wish you had.”

That’s how we learn how to live with people – the law of consequences. It’s only when we mature that we can move beyond the law of consequences to a fuller understanding of God’s wishes for us. You don’t hit your brother, not out of fear of having your butt busted, but because you love your brother. Paul had to journey from the first covenant to become an apostle and advocate for the second. I had to abandon my zeal for the law to become a speaker of the Gospel. This conflict brought Paul to the road to Damascus. It brought me to

Bellefonte.

Please understand that I'm not trying to draw a flattering comparison between me and Paul. What I AM trying to illustrate is the journey every Christian must take by showing you how it played out in my life. It is only by understanding this critical journey from the law of consequences to the new covenant which Jeremiah spoke of – the one God promised to write upon the hearts of His people – that we can understand that the Holy Spirit brings about real changes in people now, in the present, if we will allow it. The Holy Spirit works in this very real world, rather than in a world of myth and old stories as I was taught as a child, to guide the believer into the new covenant. Approaching life as a Christian means walking with courage into the real world of our time, following the lead of the Holy Spirit and in obedience to the law written upon your heart. It

is a harrowing task. Try telling people of the great love you have for Kim Jung Un of North Korea and see what happens. When the Holy Spirit works, apple carts get overturned. People, even very proper people, get offended, particularly if it was their apple carts which were upended.

How do we move from the first covenant – do good, get better; do bad, get worse – to the new covenant – follow the lead of the Holy Spirit in all you do, interacting with others only in love? We could not find a better, or more extreme, example than our passage from John.

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus.

The Greeks, the Gentiles to Phillip and Andrew, want

to see Jesus. They don't want to see him the way a tourist might want to see the wall of the Temple. The world, symbolized by these Greeks, has taken notice of the stunning thing which was coming into reality. Jesus replies:

The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also.

Following the will of His Father led Jesus to the cross. I can't know where it will lead you, but I know that unless you pursue the journey your Father has put you on, substituting instead pursuit of the agreeable things in life which make you comfortable, you will be left behind. Those who love their life lose it, and those

who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. No man can serve two masters. Choose carefully the road you are on.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Our prayer life reveals how we see ourselves in relationship to God. If we pray that God should alter the world, intervening to make it more agreeable to us, we see the relationship in one way. If we pray that God should alter us and intervene to tie us more closely to the journey God has set us on, we see it in a different way.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA, and used by permission.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Sermon Copyright 2017 J. Stewart Schneider