



Worship Series: “Reflecting on Justice and Mercy”

“Temptations of the Law”

Sermon Text: Matthew 12:1-14

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

Lent 1: 1 March 2017

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**“It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can stop him from lynching me,
and I think that’s pretty important.”**

--Martin Luther King Jr. (1929 – 1968).

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Hear the day’s lesson:

12 At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the sabbath; his disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. 2 When the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the sabbath.” 3 He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? 4 He entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him or his companions to eat, but only for the priests. 5 Or have you not read in the law that on the sabbath the priests in the temple break the sabbath and yet are guiltless? 6 I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. 7 But if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. 8 For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath.”

9 He left that place and entered their synagogue; 10 a man was there with a withered hand, and they asked him, “Is it lawful to cure on the sabbath?” so that they might accuse him. 11 He said to them, “Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? 12 How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath.” 13 Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and it was restored, as sound as the other. 14 But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him (Matthew 12:1-14).

Preceding the controversy with the Pharisees over Jesus’ disciples “breaking the Sabbath law,” which begins our lesson today; we read that Jesus instructs the disciples on a number of matters (see Matthew 11:1). Also John the Baptizer sends a last message to Jesus before John’s death which comes a few chapters later (Matthew 14:10). John has run afoul of Herod and his family and because of that loses his head. When the news of John’s death comes to Jesus we read that Jesus “withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself” (Matthew 14:13). We can only imagine the grief Jesus endured from his religious enemies and Herod—clearly a political adversary.

Jesus continues teaching as we read in chapter 11 and instructs the disciples and crowds about the judgment of the unrepentant. But alongside the woes he pronounces on some of the cities, Jesus also reveals that it is Jesus who will disclose who God is. It is here that Jesus invites: “Come to me, all you who are struggling hard and carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest”

(Matthew 11:28). Arriving at chapter 12 we see Jesus engages in teaching that appears to be more specific in nature. Here he will discuss the meaning and importance of the Law.

Working up an appetite as we might imagine, Jesus and the disciples walked through grain fields as they travelled from place to place. One Sabbath day the hungry disciples “were picking heads of wheat and eating them.” Unfortunately, some Pharisees saw them and questioned Jesus. Their question had to do with violation of the Sabbath laws. The Pharisees no doubt believed that the violation of the Sabbath had to do with reaping grain on the Sabbath.

Working on the Sabbath was strictly forbidden in Jesus’ day and remains so for faithfully observant Jewish adherents. Of course there are many laws that pertain to what is not permitted on the Sabbath. Several of these specific laws have to do with preparing and eating food. For this reason in Jesus’ day as now, some of the faithful preparers made meals before the Sabbath began. Among those things forbidden by Sabbath law were, for example, planting, reaping, and plowing. To engage in these activities—and many others—was to violate the sacred law of the Sabbath.

Of course there were many Sabbath laws pertaining to, for instance, building things, slaughtering animals, or how far a person could walk without being judged as working on the Sabbath. Hence in this circumstance the phrase “a Sabbath’s Day journey” makes sense.

Because Jesus was the disciples teacher—the word disciple means “learner”—the Pharisees questioned Jesus. In essence they want to know why Jesus tolerates such a violation of the Sabbath. But Jesus, who by this time in Matthew’s Gospel has cast out demons (Matthew 8:28 ff.) and answered questions about fasting (Matthew 9:14 ff.), knows how to counter finger pointing—and the Pharisees’ questions were accusatory.

Reaching back into Israel’s past, Jesus brings to the Pharisees’ attention arguably the nation’s greatest political and military hero. Note no one would argue with anything that King David did (with the unhappy exception of what happened with Bathsheba). Jesus said to the Pharisees: “Haven’t you

read what David did when he and those with him were hungry?” Jesus then told them that David and his soldiers ate the bread of the presence in collusion with Ahimelech the priest (1 Samuel 21:1-6).

Jesus’ theological point with respect to the story of David and his companions (which means literally “together with bread”) is simple. On occasion it is more important to meet human need than to obey the ritual law. Jesus did not say this occasion happened often or regularly, but suggested in this story that at times human need supplants ritual law.

Part of our American heritage is that we like to think of ourselves as self-sufficient and unrestricted people without limits. We do not like for anyone to tell us what to do. When Rev. Cross writes about toddlers learning the word “no” first he is certainly onto something. We do not ever like anyone tell us what to do. Part of this aversion to being told what to do is we think of ourselves as being independent. Yet when people live in community and it is very difficult not to live this way in our world, law(s) helps us co-exist with one another. When every person wants to impose her or his will on others, then we have friction.

First it is key to recognize that the law has a useful purpose in helping us live with one another. Second, sometimes the law needs to be overridden for the sake of the good. Imagine an ambulance stopping at every stop light or stop sign with a critical life or death situation facing the passenger in the back. Where there is no emergency the driver will thus follow the laws. Yet when a crisis arises, the driver allows the difficulty to overtake the normal day to day traffic laws that we assume should be obeyed.

Metaphors for Hebrew law are several, but the way Paul describes the law we could think of it as a “tutor, schoolmaster, or babysitter” when understood by the Greek word “paidagogos.” The law can help train us, but eventually we act on our own.

In Hebrew scripture, Yahweh gave the Israelites the Law, amidst flames and thunder and a terrifying, terrible voice. In the midst of that, the people understood that God was serious about these commandments!



In the New Testament, Jesus speaks about the Law as well. In some cases Jesus reminded people of what the law said, in other cases Jesus even added to it. But Jesus' overriding principle about law was simply that regardless about how important sacrifice may be, it is with mercy that the law ought always to be tempered.

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