

The Declaration of Dependence

October 2, 2011 World Communion, Ord 28A

Hebrew Scriptures: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

20:1 Then God spoke all these words:

20:2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

20:3 you shall have no other gods before me.

20:4 You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

20:7 You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

20:8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.

20:9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

20:12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

20:13 You shall not murder.

20:14 You shall not commit adultery.

20:15 You shall not steal.

20:16 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

20:17 You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

20:18 When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance,

20:19 and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die."

20:20 Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

Proclamation of the Word

A comedian (George Carlin) had a routine that contrasted the personalities of football and baseball. He said,

In football, you march downfield with a punishing ground attack and an aerial assault to break into the opposing team's end zone.

In baseball, the object is to go home, to be safe at home.¹

That routine fits when we discuss about law and gospel in church. They seem to be two very different games: law and gospel.

Hugh Spitler told me about a party they once had where there were two coolers. One said "Grace" and the other said "Law." Soft drinks were in the cooler marked "Law." Beer was in the cooler marked "Grace."

In some minds...The law is about punishment. The Gospel is about forgiveness.

Law is the stuff *we* are supposed to do. Gospel is what God has done for us.

The Law is about punishment, discipline, rules. Gospel is about salvation, grace, forgiveness.

If I had to describe what Law and Gospel sound like in a song

Grace sounds like...(JUDY, hit it!) the song *Amazing Grace*

Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come, 'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far and grace will lead me home. (Bet you did not know this could be the official Baseball hymn)

The Law sounds(JUDY, Hit it!) like Darth Vader's theme, the Imperial March from the *Star Wars* movies *Dum Dum dum Da Dum....*

But what if I told you they are the two sides of the same coin?

The gift of faith is grace/gospel and our response in obedience is the law.

Laws are usually helpful. At a four way STOP it is helpful that we take turns. I know preaching to the choir- this crowd is likely full of law-abiding types.

Consider the people of faith before they were wandering in the wilderness. Up until now, God's relationship had been all grace and promise. God made a covenant with Noah to never again destroy the earth and cover it with floods. He tried to get their attention with a rainbow after the rain as a sign. Some of them forgot the promise. God made promises of blessing to Abraham and Sarah that their descendents would outnumber the stars, and God gave them a little boy named Isaac to bring them laughter and joy. But now these people have become a few generations removed from the blessings and promises, the grace. God stops with the "I shalls," the "I will bless and keep you," and now here comes the Law, the "You shalls". God is revealed at the summit of Mt. Sinai to Moses and Aaron in the form of some game rules. And Yahweh God starts with a little preamble- "I am God, your God. Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of a life of slavery." In other words, here is what you need to know in order to live in this new-found freedom. Like Joy and Bobby Skelton who told me that as parents they always remind their teenage daughters of the 5 S's before they go out with friends: *Be Sweet, Safe, Smart, Sober, Celibate*

Why do parents tell their children these things? Because children are precious to them. Children are our most special treasures.

Like God says to the Hebrew people. Chosen people are called to act in chosen ways. God reminds them that the promise is coming to fruition. A little recap in Exodus Chapter 19 reminds them that a few months before, God held the Egyptians down and led them out of Egypt and slavery on eagle's wings. God tells them, "You saw what I did. I did what I promised and now here is what I expect from you." God says to Moses tell my children, "If you will listen obediently to what I say and keep my covenant, out of all peoples you will be my special treasure. The whole Earth is mine to choose from, but you are special." (Exodus 19, *The Message*).² God's people are a special treasure and obedience is the response.

To our Hebrew ancestors and Jewish sisters and brothers, the Law is sweet and yummy like a candy bar. The Law is more valuable than gold...Listen to Psalm 19:7-10 which praises the Law.

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

When they meditated on Scripture, it was a reminder of their being set free to love and serve God and neighbor and not to be slaves. I wonder if they repeated the words of the law, like we parents say “commands” to kids as they leave the house.

My mother always said, “Please be Careful” as we left the house. With four older brothers who liked to take risks like my brother Andy who would race anything with wheels on it, hunt anything that moved, and my other brothers who played sports, “Please be careful” was the benediction pronounced at the kitchen door as we left home. Law would be repeated as part of the everyday conversation to keep us in check.

These laws are succinct. Just 10 so that I child could learn them by counting on his fingers. They are practices that keep us safe and protect the well-being of the community. God claims us as God’s own beloved ones, and says because I love you, I want you to act like you are my special treasure.

The Laws written on stone tablet is the people of God’s Charter of Freedom. We have some famous charters of freedom. You may know the words by heart to the ***Preamble of the US Constitution***

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

This is a great vision. I am thankful to live in a nation that stands on these ideals. While we have declared independence...independence from tyranny, this preamble is a declaration of dependence, also. People are called together for the common good for all, for the general wellbeing, peace, and justice of us all. Your well-being is bound up in my wellbeing. It does not mean you and I are free to do whatever we please. If want to form a more perfect union, we have to have some ground rules.

In the same way, God is giving the people their charter of freedom. It reminds us from what we are freed, and for what we are freed. God saved us from a life of servitude and we are

Free FROM hunger, slavery, lack of dignity, self-interest and self-destruction

Free FOR community, security, peace, responsibility, and WORSHIP of almighty God

In that freedom, we will be dependent on God and function as an interdependent community. This is a declaration of Dependence. None of us can live without God and without one another.

The Good News, the Gospel, is that God renews the covenant time and time again, because surely one of the commands was broken as soon as they were sandblasted into stone. Even when the people are unfaithful, when Aaron leads the gold smelting party and shapes a golden calf for the people in the next chapter, God takes them back and reminds them over and over again of what is good for them. The prophet Jeremiah tells the chosen people that God will write the covenant on their heart so they are not following empty rules, but loving a benevolent, faithful God. And then Jesus comes to set it all straight and sets before us a new covenant and so fulfills the law.

Did you know the Bible never calls the Law the *10 Commandments*?

I think we should rename them- *The 10 Ways to Show Love*. Jesus summed up the Law in this way, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.” Obedience is the fruit of our faith. The Laws are there only to serve the law of loving relationships between God and God’s special treasures. God’s Law governs our relationships with our next door neighbors, our across town neighbors, and our neighbors living across other borders. When we really meditate upon them, we see the depth of each one. Sure you can take it at face value, “Do not murder” which was said ironically to Moses

who had murdered an Egyptian. But it is so much bigger than that. God created life. God is a life-giving God. Any action or word that kills or harms the life of another, whether physically, emotionally or spiritually, offends God.

These are the guideposts that will promote life for this little band of followers in faith. They are the tent poles and anchors that will provide shelter on the wilderness journey. These will keep us on the right paths. God's revelation in Jesus Christ reveals itself in self-giving love and grace. Even Jesus broke the human manifestation of the Sabbath command, by feeding the hungry and healing the sick on the Sabbath, even going on a CROP walk for hunger because these acts are the fruits of God's life-giving love. Law is always in service of the Gospel. And Gospel Good News is in the Law. I said earlier that Law and Gospel are two sides of the same coin, but Jesus Christ is always "heads". The Law is always in service to Love and to Jesus, our Savior, who fully embodied that love to us

The *10 Ways to Show Love* then is one of our Charters of Freedom, our *Declaration of Dependence* on God and each other. We need God and we need one another. It's like God says over and over, "I'm doing this for your own good." And we forget that. We try to live independently, unhindered, self-sufficiently. We forget our need for a God who is our rock and our redeemer.

As we come to this table of grace today, we remember that God's promises are never conditional. We remember that Grace has been with us from the beginning of time. This same God could not bear to banish Adam and Eve from the garden, fed and provided water for us in the wilderness, called us back with the help of prophets when we were faithless and lost our way. This same God welcomes us home as the prodigal son, the prodigal daughter and spreads a feast for the whole family to celebrate. This same God in Jesus Christ suffered and died to show forth the power of love even for his enemies, not responding in hate, but in forgiveness.

He offers us the cup of salvation and the bread of new life.

He came to be the new covenant, the promised one, who is faithful to the end.

The least we can do is respond in obedient love to such grace!

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¹ These ideas came from Nathan Aaseng, "The Law of Grace," at http://www.workingpreacher.org/columnist_home.aspx?article_id=509

² Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, (Navpress; Colorado, 2002).