

### **Old Testament Lesson: Micah 6:6-8**

<sup>6</sup>“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? <sup>7</sup>Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” <sup>8</sup>He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

### **New Testament Lesson: Mark 7:1-8, 14-23**

<sup>7</sup>Now when the Pharisees and some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem gathered around him, <sup>2</sup>they noticed that some of his disciples were eating with defiled hands, that is, without washing them. <sup>3</sup>(For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; <sup>4</sup>and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.) <sup>5</sup>So the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?” <sup>6</sup>He said to them, “Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written,

‘This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me;

<sup>7</sup>in vain do they worship me,  
teaching human precepts as doctrines.’

<sup>8</sup>You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”

<sup>14</sup>Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and understand: <sup>15</sup>there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.”

<sup>17</sup>When he had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. <sup>18</sup>He said to them, “Then do you also fail to understand? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile, <sup>19</sup>since it enters, not the heart but the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?” (Thus he declared all foods clean.) <sup>20</sup>And he said, “It is what comes out of a person that defiles. <sup>21</sup>For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup>adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. <sup>23</sup>All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

### **Sermon: The Love of the Law and the Law of Love – Rev. Bill Gause**

When I read this passage I was reminded of a story I heard once about two American men who were on vacation traveling in the United Kingdom when they happened upon a restaurant with a sign out front reading: “No Football Coaches.” One of the men happened to coach football at a small high school in South Carolina and he found himself a little miffed at what appeared to be blatant discrimination against members of his noble profession.

What have they got against us? He asked his friend. And how would they know anyway? Do they check IDs or something?

Incensed, he walked into the establishment and asked of the waitress why he was not allowed inside. With the patience of a woman who had answered this question before she said: “you yanks; it’s like you don’t know English! Football is what you blokes call “soccer” and a coach is a bus. The sign means we don’t want busses full of soccer hooligans to stop here.” No Football Coaches.

He knew the words, but he didn’t know what they meant.

In the passage we read from Mark this morning, Jesus basically says the same thing to the Pharisees. By their understanding of the law and the legal traditions that had grown up around it to clarify situations where the law itself was unclear, the Pharisees had reached the conclusion that it was necessary for all good Jews to wash their hands in the accepted ritual way before eating.

But the point of such strenuous observation of the cleanliness laws was not being clean or avoiding Swine Flu. The point of the hand washing was to show that they were the people of God and that they were doing God’s will. For the Pharisees this was why they kept such strict observance of the Law.

In Exodus 19:6, God explains to Moses that Israel will “be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.” They are to be a group set apart from the rest of the world; chosen by God by God’s own grace, and their lives were meant to display that connection to God. Much of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy outline the specifics of how they are to enact that special connection to God, by circumcising the males, by refraining from eating certain unclean things; by refusing to lapse into some of the anti-social practices that could threaten to destroy the life of the community. These were more than simply rules or ordinances; they were the symbols of devotion to God, a collective response to God’s grace, mercy, and love. Much like our sacraments of baptism and communion, keeping the law was an enacted statement that these are the people of God.

But keeping every aspect of the law could be a Herculean task and sometimes situations arose that would force a devout Jew to choose between keeping the law and doing what was right.

In the familiar story of the Good Samaritan, Jesus describes a wounded traveler laying beside the Jericho road. Both a Levite and a Priest walk by and pass along the other side of the road. The story ends with a Samaritan stopping to help the man and extend him care and courtesy, but what often gets missed is that the Priest and the Levite most likely did not stop to help because from their vantage point, the traveler may have appeared dead, and to touch a dead body would have made them unclean.

It was an ancient game of cooties, except that the old formula “circle, circle, dot, dot, now you have a cootie shot,” was ineffective. There were an elaborate set of rituals for cleansing the unclean person that included bathing, showing oneself to a priest, offering appropriate sacrifices, and waiting a prescribed period of time before interacting with other people.

Such a process was time consuming and tedious and it was much easier to remain ritually clean.

In the passage from Mark that we read this morning, the Pharisees ask why the disciples haven't washed their hands before eating? And Jesus answers them saying: "The people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me."

It's a line from Isaiah, but it gets to the heart of the matter: the Pharisees like our football coach, know all the words, but they have no idea what those words mean.

Jesus describes exactly what he believes the words of the law mean later on in Mark when, challenged by one of the scribes to choose which of all the laws is greatest, Jesus says "The first is... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31)

For Jesus, all of the words of the law taken together do not mean more than the simple twin commandments to love God with everything that you have and Love your neighbor as yourself. This is the Law of Love. And to understand this is to understand the point of God's law.

Doing some reading this week, I came across a story about the former mayor of New York City Fiorello LaGuardia, who served from 1934-1945; during the last years of the great depression. At one time it was the privilege of the mayor of New York to also serve as magistrate in any city court whenever he chose. And so it was the habit of Mayor LaGuardia to stop by and relieve a judge of his bench from time to time.

The story goes that one bitterly cold day in 1935, Mayor LaGuargia dropped in on one of the city courts and began hearing cases. At some point the bailiffs brought a trembling man before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. "I've got to punish you," declared LaGuardia. "The law makes no exceptions. I can do nothing but sentence you to a fine of ten dollars."

But then Laguardia reached into his pocket and pulled out a ten-dollar bill, and dropping it into his hat said, "Well, here's the ten dollars to pay your fine. Furthermore, I'm going to fine everybody in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a man has to steal bread in order to eat." The hat was passed and an incredulous old man, left the courtroom with a stake of forty-seven dollars and fifty cents.

(Cerf, Bennet. Try and Stop Me, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1945, pp. 268-269 as recorded on Snopes.com: <http://www.snopes.com/glurge/laguardia.asp> )

This story of LaGuardia's mercy and largesse may be apocryphal, but it makes a point about the difference between keeping the letter of A law and honoring the INTENT of the Body of Laws.

And Jesus often let slide with the letter of the law in order to obey the law of love:

- When the hemorrhaging woman fights through the crowded streets to touch Jesus' cloak, she violates the law to do so. She was unclean and rendered those she touched unclean. Yet Jesus stops and reaches out to her, healing her and loving her.

- When Jesus encounters the woman at the well, he violates the law by speaking to her: a woman alone in public.

- When Jesus and the disciples are hungry on the Sabbath, they pluck a few heads of grain, drawing the ire of the Pharisees who considered such action to be work and a violation of the Sabbath injunction to do no work.

- And when Jesus encounters a man with a withered hand while teaching on the Sabbath, Jesus heals him, and according to Matthew, says that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

But this is consistent with what Jesus says to his disciples after the encounter with the Pharisees. It is not what you eat that makes you unclean; it is what comes out of your heart. Put another way, it is not how well you observe all of the various codes and statutes that matters to God, but whether or not your life produces good fruit. If you are the people of God; if you are doing God's will, we will all be able to see it in the things that you do with your life. If your life produces good, you are doing God's will. If your life produces evil, you are not.

Which is totally in line with much of what the prophets were saying to Israel back in the Old Testament:

Isaiah 1:11-17 reads in part "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord... Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

And in the book of the prophet Hosea (Hosea 6:6) "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

And again in Amos (5:21-24) <sup>21</sup>I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies... Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream.

And perhaps most famously in our Old Testament lesson for today, Micah 6:6-8: He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

Serving God. Obeying God. Being the people of God: these are not about strict keeping of codes and statutes. They are about loving God and neighbor. They are about living lives that produce good fruit glorifying to God. Yes the law is important, (Jesus said not one letter of the law would pass away until God's kingdom comes) but when you keep the law and do evil, you are not doing God's will. That was Jesus' point.

We don't have controversy over hand washing in the modern Church, but we do have controversies. Two of the biggest have affected people I know.

The first is a pastor I know who was recently called by a very conservative Presbyterian congregation to be their first ever woman associate pastor. I asked her how it was being the first woman to break that barrier. She told me that many people were glad to have her and were

supportive, but that she had also had a number of people who were openly hostile to her. One person even pulled her aside at church and told her that she was an abomination.

The second is a young man that I know who has known he was gay for some time now, but only recently came out to his parents. He is a good man with a kind heart and one of the finest, most faithful Christians I know. But his parents called him a sinner, compared him to a serial killer, and told him that he is an abomination.

And what is unfortunate is that both of these people are good and decent and lead lives that bear good fruit, glorifying to God. Those who find fault with them, may have a scriptural case to make, but in their attitudes toward these two people they have shown that while they may know the words of the law, they do not understand what the law means, and they certainly don't comprehend what it means to love God and neighbor.

And making the argument that God's law forbids homosexuality or women in ministry is frustrating because of the selective way in which those laws are applied.

True, in different places within the Bible it is mentioned that women should remain silent in church (1 Cor. 14:34) and that men who lay with men are an abomination (Lev. 18:22, & 20:13). But there are also injunctions against wearing clothes made of two kinds of cloth (Lev. 19:19), planting your fields with more than one kind of seed (Lev. 19:19) and usury which is the collecting of interest on loans of money or property (Ex. 22:25 & Dt. 23:19), and one of the strictest punishments is reserved for those who work on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 says that they are to be put to death.

So if you cut your grass yesterday or brought a little office work home to do after the kids went to bed you might have a problem. I say yesterday since the seventh day which is set aside as a Sabbath, is Saturday. But if we count today then I am certainly in trouble and so are you if made breakfast this morning, or ironed the clothes you are wearing or if you have plans to work on the boat this afternoon.

More frightening are the things that the law allows, like selling your daughter as a slave (Exodus 21:7), and taking slaves from the surrounding nations (Lev. 25:44). Even in the New Testament, slavery is simply an accepted part of society (see Philemon) and is never really protested or spoken out against. And did you know that according to Leviticus 25, every 50<sup>th</sup> year is to be a Jubilee unto the Lord and all property that has been sold is to be returned to the family that sold it and every person who has been indentured to servitude must be set free in that year. If you suggested keeping the Jubilee year command today, I dare say there would be a revolt of the landowners.

But this is not about observing every archaic law and resurrecting little known Biblical legal practices. AJ Jacobs wrote a book in 2007 entitled The Year of Living Biblically in which he tried to do just that and found it near to impossible. It is about recognizing that what Jesus taught and what God has consistently said through the law and the prophets is that Loving God and Loving one another, even your enemies, and living a life that produces good and not evil; this is the aim of the law.

So even if we strive to observe every letter of the law as we find it in scripture, we will bring ourselves no closer to God if we do so at the expense of doing the good that God wills from us. And we will draw no closer to being the people of God if we seek to do what is required, and fail to do what is right.

So even if you think having a woman pastor is wrong and even if you think homosexuality is a sin, we can not lose sight of the truth in what Jesus says here: that we are defiled or made holy, not by how accurately we observe the law, but by whether or not our lives produce fruit glorifying to God. And we can not allow our lives and our relationships with one another to be ruled by a love of the law that blinds us to the power of God's law of love.

To God be all glory, power, honor, and dominion, both now, and in the world that is to come.  
Amen.

Love of the Law and the Law of Love.

Rev. Bill Gause

Micah 6:6-8

Mark 7:1-8, 14-23

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

August 30, 2009