

DELIGHT IN THE LAW
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Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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I learned something this week. I read somewhere that the Founders of our government considered putting Moses on the seal of the United States. He didn't make the cut. But they considered Moses because Moses understood that liberation from tyranny is not enough. In order to prosper a nation needs laws to restrain would be tyrants and to protect and preserve liberty and freedom. Piety (love of God) and patriotism (love of country) are not enough.

Many people define freedom as freedom *from* any and all restraints—freedom to do as one pleases. That is not how Moses or our Founders understood freedom. Without laws, freedom degenerates into individualism, anarchy and license. Without laws, the powerful can freely exploit the weak. Without laws, the rule of the majority can be tyrannical. Hence, the checks and balances in our own system of governance.

We are a nation ruled by laws; not the whims of lords, emperors, politicians, majorities, or billionaires. Everyone, including the president, must submit to the law. To claim the president's authority should never be questioned is a serious threat to the rule of law.

We have before us this morning, some of the laws Moses established to keep his people free. His people had been slaves for hundreds of years. They had no experience of freedom or governance.

Besides the sampling you're about to hear, Moses devised 10 concise commandments that one could count on ten fingers, including, for example, keeping one day in seven free of work lest they turn themselves back into slaves. Work-aholism destroys the soul and spirit of a person. The Sabbath law was to be a delight, a way to preserve one's humanity, not a burden to begrudge.

Freedom from bondage is one thing. Freedom from anxiety, work-aholism, greed, cruelty, lies, and bigotry is something else. If you want to be truly free, if you want to survive and thrive as a people, said Moses, here are some laws to learn and practice.

I'll get to those. But first a flashback to the 70s.

When I was a student at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena I took several classes on preaching, or homiletics as it is called. We learned to compose a sermon—start with a joke as a hook, then three points and a concluding poem to seal the deal. I wasn't impressed and would eventually go my own way as you may have noticed.

One day we had a visiting lecturer on elocution. He was a professional British actor. I don't remember much of what he said except this: *if you preachers knew how to properly read the scriptures aloud, you wouldn't have to preach so many sermons.* And then he read a passage. And just like that I was convinced.

However, never in 42 years have I tried that. So, before I retire I thought I'd give it a try. Let's see how it works as I employ my best elocution. Listen and see how you *and our nation* are doing with these. (Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18)

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

Let me interrupt just to ask: *What does it mean to be holy?* As you are about to hear,

holiness isn't about piety or purity. It's about treating others kindly and fairly. And now back to the reading.

Be holy.

When you reap your harvest, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the immigrant: I am the LORD your God.

Be holy.

You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie. You shall not defraud your neighbor; you shall not steal; you shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer. You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind: I am the LORD.

Be holy.

You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the rich. You shall not go around as a slanderer, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the LORD.

Be holy.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge. You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Be holy.

And there ends the reading. See what I mean? Who needs a sermon after that?

And now the gospel lesson for today. (Matthew 5:38-48)

Jesus said: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say, Do not resist an evildoer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give 'em your cloak as well; if anyone forces you to go one mile, go the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say, Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you — and if I may elaborate—pray for those who get under your skin, pester, plague or really BUG YOU — pray for them so that you may be children of your Father in heaven who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

For if you love those who love you, what's so great about that? Even those you call deplorable, do that? And if you are kind only to your kin, what more are you doing than others? Be perfect, which is to say, be whole, which is to say, be wholly loving, as your heavenly Father is wholly loving.

And there ends the reading of the gospel and this experiment.

And if you wonder how many times we are to turn the other cheek, or how many extra miles to walk, or how we are to love our enemies, or pray for those who get under our skin and really bug us, all I can say is: if you figure any of that out, let me know and you can preach next Sunday.

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Hymn 345

"In An Age of Twisted Values"