

30 August 2015 (14<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost/22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time)  
Lafayette Presbyterian Church  
**“Living the Law of God”**  
Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

What do you think of when you hear the word “law”? Does it conjure up bad memories of a speeding ticket, or perhaps a more serious offense when you were a youth? Depending on whether you have an experiential view of the law—let’s say, being on the wrong side of the law and living life within the criminal justice system as a juvenile or an adult; or whether you have a theoretical view of the law—as a lawyer or teacher of constitutional history; the law will conjure up very different feelings and impressions. Many of us transgress the law as we race up and down Mahan, or travel back and forth along I-10, and we may be lucky enough not to get caught if we violate the speed limit or cruise through the intersection on the last second of the yellow light. But most of us take a dim view of serious transgressions of civil and criminal law, especially violent crimes like murder or armed robbery. And we generally respect the law, even if we’re not always perfect at following it. But what about religious law? What is the relationship between law and faith? Is it contained in the Ten Commandments? In all 613 regulations of the Torah? In Jesus’ command to love each other as he loved us? Is religious law a matter of ritual and regulation, or is it a matter of faith and of the heart? Our answer to that reveals a lot about how we understand and relate to God.

In his often testy relationship with the Pharisees in the Gospels, Jesus sometimes leaves the impression that he doesn’t care anything about religious rules and regulations. In fact, a common understanding of Jesus among young people forty and fifty years ago was that he was the perfect rebel, overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple, challenging the religious authorities, and making up his own rules as he went along. But even if the notion of “Jesus the rebel” seems an extreme relic of the social and cultural turmoil of the 1960’s and 1970’s, it is still difficult to view Jesus as someone who placed a high value on following the rules and regulations of religious law. At the very least, he was very independent.

The text before us in Mark’s Gospel underscores Jesus’ independence relative to the authoritative interpretation of the law in his day. It describes the Pharisees and scribes gathering around Jesus, as though they are watching him closely, observing everything he says and does, perhaps waiting for something they can use to challenge or discredit him. And sure enough, they observe Jesus’ disciples failing to wash their hands before eating. Why should this be so important? Because, as a matter of holiness before God, someone observant of the Law was required to regard all of life as sacred—so, if you just picked up your food without first stopping to cup your hands and let the water run through your fingers, you were failing to honor the sacred sustenance of life that God had provided. Washing one’s hands was primarily a symbolic acknowledgement of God’s presence, a way of honoring God and transforming a meal from common to sacred. And yet, when Jesus’ disciples are observed about to partake of their meal, they are found to be eating with defiled hands—hands that have not been ritually cleaned and prepared to receive God’s providence. For the scribes and Pharisees, this was a red flag: Jesus’ disciples were

not living according to the tradition of the elders. And it signaled to them that the disciples did not have a high regard for the law of God, at least as interpreted by the extensive oral tradition that had grown up around the Law of Moses. It also did not reflect well on Jesus, because he was not guiding them as the scribes and Pharisees thought he should be. And so they challenge Jesus, not the disciples, as the one in charge of their instruction: Why don't your disciples honor the tradition of the elders? Why do they eat with defiled hands?

At this point, we might expect Jesus to offer an explanation in defense of his disciples. But instead, he accuses the scribes and Pharisees of hypocrisy. Citing the prophet Isaiah, he reframes the issue from adherence to the law, to living the law as a matter of the heart. And he goes on to overturn completely the foundation on which the oral interpretation of the law had been based. Instead of viewing the law as an external means of making a person holy and making what is common sacred, Jesus offered a view of the law as that which governs the human heart. This startling reversal effectively recast religious ritual as a grateful response to God's presence, rather than as an act that could of itself make sacred what is common. Jesus' point is that our actions don't bring about God's presence—God is already present. Rather, our actions reflect what is already inside—and if evil intentions are already there, nothing that goes in is going to change what has already defiled a person, whether it is a particular food or a required ritual.

And so, does that mean that religious rules of behavior and spiritual disciplines are unimportant? Is religion meant to be totally private, all inside, just between the individual and God? I know people, for example, who are so turned off by those who make a show of their religion, they have gone in the entirely opposite direction: they never talk about their faith, and prefer to keep their good works private and anonymous. I know other people who see actions as their primary witness to God's providence and Christ's redemption. On that understanding, by demonstrating God's law by praying before meals at a restaurant, or wearing distinctive clothing that sets one apart from the world (as the Amish do), or refraining from certain foods, they remind themselves and those with whom they come in contact that faith can't remain invisible, that it has to be observed if it is to mean anything. How, then, does one live the law of God? Quietly and privately, or publicly and demonstrably? Jesus' teaching certainly does make us rethink, from the inside out, what we do as a matter of faith, and why we do it.

On this particular Sunday in the life of our church, we have "rallied around" Christian education the way the scribes and Pharisees gathered around Jesus in Mark's Gospel, although with different intent. Our purpose in gathering around, rallying around the teaching of the faith is to remind ourselves and each other of the importance of *living* the law of God. Certainly there is much that we can learn. But as people of faith who have responded to Christ's call to become the children of God, we believe that the law of God is more than learning about the Christian faith, and certainly more than fulfilling a series of behavioral rules that mark us as members of the club. Our response to Christ's call is a commitment to *become* children of God, to be transformed *day by day* into Christ's image, to learn *over time* what it means to turn from evil to good. This commitment is life long: Christian education isn't just for kids! I remember one time someone in a church telling me that they didn't need to go to Sunday School anymore because they had already learned

everything they needed to know about the Bible. Maybe. But did that person know everything he needed to know about living the law of God, about faith as a matter of the heart, about the subtlety of evil intentions and how they can wrap themselves around our hearts and minds without our even realizing what has happened to us? Our commitment to our education and formation in faith is our investment in Christ's call and claim upon our lives. It is how we come to understand what it means to live as a person sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. And the more we view that education and formation as a community enterprise, the more we can grow together as the body of Christ as well as grow individually as transformed persons.

I believe the world is closely watching the church to see how we respond to the needs around us, and how we choose to live in the face of suffering that threatens to crush all hope. As Jesus taught his disciples, what we believe matters, and what we do matters—belief and action are equally important, it's not that one is more valid or valuable than the other. The Letter of James famously reminds us, "Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers"—it does not say that we are to be doers instead of hearers. Both are essential for living the law of God. And the world is watching what we do, as well as what we say we believe. In a culture that has become coarse and trite, the church represents depth and love, honoring each individual the way each of us would want to be honored and valued as a person of inestimable worth. We see very little of that in our public and private discourse. Living the law of God means that we model a better way even when we are tempted to react in anger and frustration to the destructive behavior around us. But where do we learn how to do that? It is only by being involved with others in the kinds of nurturing relationships that give life and hope that those qualities can grow within us. It is only by studying the Bible together, considering its claims upon our life, understanding how God became present to the astonishing range of people and cultures throughout the Scriptures, encountering Christ in the Gospels and discerning the promise of Christ in the law and prophets—that's a lifetime's worth of study and reflection.

As you consider the state of your spiritual growth, your questions of faith, your dreams and your longings, I encourage you to add to your life a small group for study and prayer in which you can plumb the depths of God's love and redemption in Christ. With all of the study in which I've invested myself during my life, the best thing I have going right now is the Monday morning Bible study in the Book of Genesis. It isn't because this is the first time I've studied Genesis. It's that this is the first time I've studied Genesis with these people, and it is life giving. I hope that you will make this year your new year for spiritual growth. The church, after all, is where we learn how to live the law of God. And God's law within us is what we joyfully extend as Christ's gift to the world.



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