

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Second Sunday in Lent; March 8, 2020

“A Promise”

Scripture: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

I seem to have a knack for drawing Jury Duty. I don't know why. I've served at one time or another in pretty much every community in which I have lived. I was especially popular in Delaware County, Pennsylvania, where I was called three times in three years, though I never had to hear a trial. But that didn't stop the county from holding on to me for hours on end just in case my services were needed. And I have already had the opportunity to serve here in Hennepin County. Actually was selected for the jury and spent the better part of a whole week commuting to the courthouse in downtown Minneapolis. And each time I have served, be it a few hours or several days, jury service ends with a profuse word of thanks, a brief lecture on our good citizenship in fulfilling this “sacred” obligation, a few dollars for our trouble, and a dismissal... until the system needs us again, of course, when we'll be involuntarily wrenched from our daily responsibilities to help keep the wheels of justice rolling.

You know, it really is an incredible system, an enormous sort of machine. All day long, nearly every day, the accused are brought before the judge's bench, statutes

are referenced, charges are levied, and the state goes about the work of sorting out the guilty from among the presumed innocent. When I am a part of this machine, I am always overwhelmed when I consider the incredible amount of time and money absolutely consumed by this process, because so many people out there are simply unwilling to treat one another with decency or to act with honesty or fairness. And this is just what I see in Jury Duty, not to mention the daily hard work of the lawyers and judges, all the trials, the incarceration, the law enforcement agencies, criminal rehabilitation... or recidivism, and it just goes on and on.

It sure is necessary, but it's not really so nice. The apostle Paul was right... In many ways, the Law does bring wrath. The Law is complex and rife with opportunities for evil. Justice is often served... and sometimes highly perverted, even in our system which I hold to be about as good as it can be, right?...: Presumed innocent before proven guilty; Trial by a jury of one's peers; Rules to protect the accused... Honestly, I'm grateful to live in a society that guarantees these liberties, and I'm willing to fulfill my civic duty as a juror to help maintain them. But how I wish for a more excellent way, a more gracious and uplifting way. Like Paul... a Pharisee, a keeper of Law in his time, who collapses under the weight of the legal and moral burdens of his life and only begins to recover his soul by turning to Jesus, the one who "...gives life to the dead, and calls into existence things that do not exist."

The whole point of today's readings from scripture (as I see it) is to teach us that our relationship with God, the relationship we have come to know through knowing Jesus, begins not with a Law, not with a set of rules... but with a promise. *Abram, go where I lead you, and I will bless you and make you a blessing for others.* That's it. That's the story of the beginning of our redemption by God... the beginning of our faith thousands of years ago through an ancient, wandering Semitic couple who God would name Sarah and Abraham. Yet perhaps that promise is both the beginning *and* the end of our faith...

See, I think it easier to break a Law than to break a promise. The Law is imposed upon us, but a promise is something we make, something we willingly agree to accept. The Law is systematic, broadly applied, and largely impersonal. But a promise is intimate, between persons, engendering hope, requiring trust. While breaking the Law thwarts the blind justice of the system of an objective body of statutes printed in books, breaking a promise can mean to break another person's heart and perhaps one's own in the process. So, God chose to relate to those chosen to bless the world, first and foremost, by a promise, before the Law was given and before wrath became a part of our experience of God.

Maybe now we can begin now to understand a little more just how completely surprising and different Jesus is... to Paul, to the disciples, to the priests and scribes and Pharisees and leaders of his day, to Nicodemus, who thought he had better sneak out in the dark just to talk this strange and fascinating person. Because Jesus' respect for the Law under which his people lived extends beyond the "letter of the law" and emphasizes the very root of relationship with God... a hopeful, faithful, loving promise. As Paul reminds those reading his letter to the Romans:

"For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs [of God's promise], faith is null and the promise is void. For the law brings wrath..."

But Jesus calls us back to the truth of the matter, the reason for everything from the beginning, *"For God so loves the world that he gives his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God does not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* That is the reason for the promise. It is a promise that heals us, saves us, makes us whole. That is the reason from the beginning to end in the scriptures... not wrath, nor condemnation, but our salvation, our wholeness, and life through a loving, gracious promise with God.

You know, perhaps Lent, of all seasons of the Church, should be the one we celebrate most. Perhaps in Lent we should all smile a bit more, laugh a bit more readily, love a bit more fully, reach out to others more earnestly. Because we take the time in Lent to take stock of our sins... and we know God will forgive if we but ask. Or do we think faith is about getting everything right? Maybe more right than others? About being pure and perfect? Or that faith is fulfilled solely by following the Law without changing the heart? Practicing our religion while forgetting to love and forgive others as we have been forgiven? Remember, I don't think Jesus has a problem with the Law any more than I do. We need it. It holds us responsible for the way we treat others, and I appreciate the attorneys and the judges and the officers and those who do their best to build a just and safe society. It's just that I'm entirely with the apostle Paul here... I don't think it will ever be the Law that saves us, that heals us, that brings us our ultimate peace. For that we need to live by an old and gracious promise, ... born of love, lived by faith, and bound by trust... as the spiritual offspring of Abraham and followers of the Way of Jesus... it is God's promise that we are blessed... in order that we may become for others a blessing.

Happy Lent!