

LAW AND EROS

Sermon preached by K.C. Ptomey, Jr.

Scripture: Luke, Psalm 19

Third Sunday of Lent

March 15, 2009

A man on the third row of folding chairs in the Sunday School class I was teaching raised his hand. We were discussing the ways in which the world is becoming increasingly secular. And yes, we were bemoaning the loss of the influence of the Judeo-Christian moral and ethical tradition. “This is too complicated,” he said. “Just give it to me in several bullets on one side of an 8 1/2 x 11 sheet of notebook paper.”

It’s a sentiment we all share, isn’t it? We long for a simplified, clear articulation of what God expects, a list of instructions that will help us to apply the brakes to what at times feels like a society, a culture that like a run-away mountain train is careening down the tracks toward inevitable disaster.

I read an interview recently of a young theologian who was giving her assessment of our current situation. Here are a few sentences.

When I think of postmodernism, I think of deconstruction. Of things being dismantled. Of old things being taken apart. It’s like I live in a world where all the things my parents took for granted as being “true” are now lying around in fragments, and our generation is dancing around in the midst of these pieces....I feel like our generation is standing in the rubble of demolished houses hoping someone shows up to help us figure out how to build something beautiful and safe.....We need someone to share with us the wisdom, the know-how, the basic rules of community – because we don’t know those anymore.^[1]

“Give it to me in several bullets on one side of sheet of notebook paper.”

Several years ago, you may not remember, I can’t forget because it happened in my home state, Judge Roy Moore placed a 5,280-pound stone rendering of the Ten Commandments in the lobby of his courthouse in Montgomery, Alabama.^[2] Apparently he was more than a little agitated about what he observed as the loss of a moral center. He may have been naïve in thinking a stone monument can rectify the situation but give him credit, forgive the pun, for *weighing* in on the issue.

^[1] Serene Jones, “Bounded Openness: Postmodernism, Feminism, and the Church Today,” **Interpretation**, (January 2001), pp.49–50.

^[2] Thanks to Tom Long for the details. See, “Dancing the Decalogue,” **The Christian Century**, (March 7, 2006), p.17.

Last Thursday, less than three hours after the judge had revoked Bernard Madoff's bail over three hundred people *weighed* in on the subject by posting responses on the *New York Times* web site. I didn't read them all, but many were critical of the Securities and Exchange Commission and called for stricter regulations. It sounds almost as if the thinking is that the moral center is giving way to greed and fraud and the way to correct it is with a few more rules and laws.

To repeat the words of the theologian I just quoted, "I feel like our generation is standing in the rubble of demolished houses hoping someone shows up to help us figure out how to build something beautiful and safe...."

Of course we learned long ago that the Ten Commandments don't solve many problems. Early, very early, the simple list of ten laws multiplied into six-hundred-thirteen laws, an attempt to interpret the original ten because God's people couldn't decide exactly what simple instructions meant, like "You shall not kill," sounds simple enough. Yet... is capital punishment a violation of this law? Is self-defense or war? What about procedures involved in harvesting stem cells? Even the simplest commands are complicated.

People long for a simple and clear articulation of what is right and what is wrong. Yet, not only is interpretation difficult, we also disagree about which Biblical laws and requirements ought to be obeyed and which can be ignored. Paul says women should cover their heads in church. That's one we've decided – and rightly in my opinion - not to obey. Leviticus prohibits eating shrimp, most Christians think it's ok to ignore this one, as well as the one about no bacon with your eggs.

So there are problems with law. Which laws do we follow? All the laws of the Bible or only some? What do they mean? Are we bound by laws governing sexual behavior but not by dietary laws or the laws governing women's apparel?

This law thing is a problem. On the one hand, the world seems to resist God's law as something onerous and restrictive. We are increasingly approving of a style of individualism and autonomy that admits to no authority beyond ourselves. On the other hand there is a deep desire for moral order, some abiding principles to live by; several bullets on single page.

By now you are beginning to recognize the dilemma presented by Psalm 19. It is a celebration of God's law. But, Psalm 19 is just the tip of the iceberg. The Psalter itself begins with a celebration of law. Psalm 1, "Blessed is the person whose delight is in the law of the Lord." And get this, Israel's understanding of law is not limited to the Ten Commandments or even six-hundred-thirteen interpretations I mentioned earlier. The first five books of the Bible we call *torah*, "law" or better, "instruction."

Notice this as well, just as there are five books in the *torah* there are five sections to the Psalter.^[3] Clearly the editor of the Psalter wanted us to catch the drift: there is an analogy between God's instruction, God's *torah*, and the psalms. The psalms, not just Psalm 1 and Psalm 19 and Psalm 119 – that's the one with 176 stanzas celebrating God's law, I challenge the choir to sing that one some Sunday morning – not just the obvious ones but the whole of the Psalter is a celebration of, a song of joy prompted by, God's law. Obviously the psalmist understands that at the deepest level God's law is not problematic, confining, or restrictive. *Torah* is not something to be dismissed as antithetical to human freedom. *Torah* is life giving. The Psalter as *torah* is an invitation to happiness.

One begins to understand this delight in the law of God when one remembers that according to the Biblical story, law comes considerably later than grace. God creates us and decides to be related to us before the law. We reject God's grace, but God loves us still. God sends the flood, cleanses the earth, starts all over again, promises never to destroy us. Noah, however, fresh off the boat gets drunk and exposes himself shamelessly before his children. The storyteller is clear: hard as we try, human beings just can't seem to get it right. Yet, God loves us still.

Israel is in captivity. God hears their cry and delivers them. Feeds them, gives them water, guides them through the wilderness. They complain. They want to go back to Egypt. But God does not give up on them.

Finally, law. After all that grace, finally, law. It's not that God gives them (us) a way to become deserving of God's grace. It's that God gives Israel (us) a guide to how to respond to the grace that God has been dishing up in generous measure since the first day of creation.

This is precisely why Calvin included God's law as an element in the Sunday service. Every Lord's Day his congregations sang the Commandments. Do you know where this act of worship was located in the liturgy? After the Assurance of Pardon. Get it? Not as a suggestion as to how to please God and receive God's forgiveness but as a response to that forgiveness. Calvin said, "The law is a rule of thankful obedience on the part of the Christian."^[4]

Here's how one scholar summarizes the situation: our relationship with God is both "profoundly unconditional and massively conditional."^[5] Think of the relationship between parents and children. A parent's love is profoundly unconditional. Nothing the child can do will ever cause the parent to stop loving that child. Yet, on the part of the

[3] J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), p.27. The five sections: 1–41; 42–72; 43–89; 90–106; 107–150.

[4] Joel R. Beeker, "The Place of the Third Use of the Law in Reformed Theology," www.ctsfw.edu/events/symposium/sym2.

[5] Brueggemann, p.36.

parent there are high and often insistent expectations. When those expectations are not met there is disappointment, sometimes alienation, sometimes anger and often consequences. But the parent never stops loving the child.^[6]

God's love for us is "profoundly unconditional," no prerequisites, no deserving implied. AND that kind of love includes, indeed gives birth to, incredible expectations. The *torah*, God's law is the guide and clue to the shape of those expectations.

Another way to put it is in our relationship with God there is both *agape* and *eros*. *Agape*, as you all know because preachers have told you a thousand times, is love that is the product of the will. It is choosing to do the right thing for another quite apart from how you feel. It is duty. *Agape*, willingness to obey God out of duty. No relationship survives if there is no sense of duty, no will to do what is right by the other, no matter how you feel.

But alongside of *agape* is also *eros*. *Eros* is wanting to be with the beloved, it's the desire and the delight in pleasing the beloved, it is "finding in the joy of the one loved one's own true joy."^[7] The depth of the joy one finds in the beloved prompts one to continually ask, "What else can I do in order to delight the beloved?"

When the psalmist describes the heavens telling the glory of God and the earth proclaiming God's handiwork, this is *eros*. Creation is passionate, is carried away by the glory of God. The creation cannot but give glory.

When the psalmist sings that the law of God revives the soul, makes wise the simple, rejoices the heart, enlightens the eyes, and is to be more desired than fine gold, it is simply an ecstatic outpouring of delight in delighting the beloved.

This is why Israel rejoices in the law. After all that God has done for us our heart's desire is to please God, give joy to God, respond in thanksgiving to God in ways that delight God even as God delights us daily with gifts of grace.

Many musicians understand this *eros* of which I have been speaking, no one understood it more profoundly than J.S. Bach who expressed this *eros* in what is perhaps his most familiar composition. "Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring."

Finally it's not about several bullets on a single page of paper. It's not about Ten Commandments or six-hundred-thirteen. It's about a relationship. It's about duty to be sure but it is also about *eros*. The passion to delight in the delight of the beloved. It's about God becoming the joy of our desiring.

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^[6] *Ibid.*, p.37.

^[7] *Ibid.*, p.39.

