



LAW AND GRACE

October 10, 2017, The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Exodus 20:1-4,7-9, 12-20; Philippians 3:4b-9

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Theme: Law and grace are both gifts from God.

Honestly God, we do want to do the right thing, at least most of the time. We really do want to live lives of integrity, but time and again the choices aren't simple. And even when we know what's right, mortal flesh is sometimes weak. Illumine our choosing, Gracious God, by the light of Your word in Scripture. Show us the way, and then strengthen us to walk in it. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Any number of deeply divisive issues are pulling us apart these days. We live in a culturally and politically polarized time. Complex issues tend to be reduced to simplistic either/or dichotomies. You're either on one side or the other. You're either pro-gun control or anti; you're either pro-choice or pro-life; you're either a liberal or a conservative. It's one party or the other, and it's ripping us apart.

500 years ago, the Christian world was about to be torn apart by its own deeply divisive issue, one that would come to divide Europe into two camps. The issue was theological. In a nutshell, the dividing question was the title of this sermon: "law and grace" or, one might say, "law or grace."

The Medieval Roman Catholic Church had developed some strands of thought and practice which suggested that being a good Christian was mostly about obeying rules, the doing of which earned you a reconciled relationship with God and a



ticket to heaven – or maybe just purgatory – depending on how good you were at rule-obeying.

In the early 16th Century, a German monk named Martin Luther was troubled by these ideas. Luther read his Bible, especially the letters of Paul, and concluded that Scripture teaches Christians that they can never be good enough to earn God's salvation. It's a free gift, what Paul called "grace." We are indeed called to do the right thing, but you can never do it right enough to get yourself a ticket to heaven. 500 years ago, on the last day of October 1517, Luther, good German that he was, made a list of questions about which he wanted to start a discussion. He nailed them to the door of the parish church, which is what you did back then when you wanted to start a public conversation. They came to be called "The 95 Theses." Luther didn't want to break away and start a new church. In fact, those 95 Theses often spoke positively of the papacy. He just wanted to talk through some theological issues, mostly the law-grace question.

As so often happens, both sides soon retreated to extreme positions. Rome would soon excommunicate this troublesome German monk. Luther, a strong personality, would say some pretty intemperate things about the Roman Church. Protestant and Catholic positions immediately began to harden. The divisiveness soon expanded to include a slew of issues that were not part of the original law-grace question – questions about the Pope, the sacraments, whether worship should be in Latin or the language of the people, whether clergy should marry. Within a decade, Europe would descend into a bloodbath called the "Wars of Religion," serial horrors that would span the next hundred years. And it all started with a perfectly good theological question about law and grace.

That's the bad news; now the happy news. On October 31, Reformation Day of 1999, eighteen years ago, representatives of the Vatican and the World Lutheran Federation gathered in Augsburg, Germany to sign a document called "The Joint Declaration." It had been hammered out over preceding decades. The Joint Declaration stated that Roman Catholics and Lutherans were now in essential agreement on the law-grace question.



Here's a key sentence from that document: "Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works." 482 years after Luther started it all, the original issue dividing Catholics and Protestants was basically resolved.

Let me bring this closer to home. Avery Dulles was the son of John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State under Eisenhower. Before John Foster Dulles ever went to Washington and long before they named the airport after him, Dulles was an active member of Brick Church, indeed he served as President of our Board of Trustees. His son, Avery, went to Sunday School at Brick, attended St. Bernard's School, and went on to Harvard where he announced his atheism. But he would soon become a Roman Catholic, a Jesuit priest, and noted theologian. He was named a Cardinal in 2001. I'm telling you this because of what Avery Dulles wrote about that Protestant-Catholic Joint Declaration: "It clearly says to a world that hovers on the brink of unbelief that the two churches that split Western Christianity... nearly five centuries ago are still united on truths of the highest import... In view of this shared heritage of faith, we are confident that our doctrinal formulations... can in the end be reconciled."

Reformation Sunday is always the Sunday prior to October 31, the day Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the church door. This year, Reformation Sunday falls on October 29, three weeks from today. I am happy to announce to you that on that day, I will preach at the 11:00 a.m. High Church Mass at St. Ignatius Loyola Roman Catholic Church. The preacher here at Brick Church will be Fr. Dennis Yesalonia, Senior Pastor of St. Ignatius.

Father Yesalonia and I would disagree on a number of theological questions of import. I don't trivialize those differences, but I'd estimate that we'd agree on about 80 or 90 percent of what matters for Christians. I've arranged for this "pulpit exchange" because, in what Dulles named a "world on the brink of unbelief," it is so crucial that Christians put the accent on what we have in common more than on what we disagree about. Today, happily, one of the things



we have in common is our basic understanding of the matter that separated us 500 years ago – law and grace.

Of course, both are needful. Both are gifts from God. The Law, specifically the Ten Commandments that Peter just read in the first Scripture Lesson, is a gift to humanity because they show us how to live fulfilling lives of integrity. I like to say that “the law is the kind of burden that a rudder is to a ship.” It can be a fairly complicated piece of nautical machinery, but that rudder, like moral law, keeps the vessel on course and off the rocks.

In a sermon I preached some years ago, I painted another word picture of law as gift: Imagine an eight-year-old who’s just opened his or her main birthday present. This year’s main gift is a complicated electronic toy with 36 pages of instructions in French, Spanish and English. Some assembly is indeed required. The kid bursts with excitement and rips the toy out of its Styrofoam packing. Mom says, “Slow down, kiddo, let’s sit down and read these directions. I’ll show you how it works.” The child answers, “No, I want to do it all by myself” and trots off behind the couch leaving the directions in dad’s lap. In twenty minutes the kid’s back, angry and frustrated, on the edge of tears. The stupid thing doesn’t work. Nothing fits right. One piece is already busted.

You and I have been given such a “birthday gift” – precious lives that have to be lived in a very complicated world. But here’s good news. This “main gift” came with directions.

But remember also Luther’s point about the moral law 500 years ago: No matter how good you are at keeping it, no matter how good you are at “following directions,” you’re never good enough. We just can’t save ourselves.

In the second Lesson that Peter read, the Apostle Paul makes the exact same point. He begins by noting how good he was at keeping his version of the law back in his Pharisee days: “As to righteousness under that law,” he says he was “blameless.” But it didn’t work. Later in the passage, he goes on to reject “righteousness of my



own that comes from the law” and finally, with relief and in liberation, Paul rests in what he names, “righteousness from God based on faith.”

The good news for you and me is the same good news Paul heard 2,000 years ago, the same good news Luther remembered 500 years ago: “You don’t have to achieve the grace of God. There is nothing you have to do to earn it. In Jesus Christ, it’s freely given. You are accepted.”

You and I didn't do anything to deserve last Friday – 75 degrees and bright sun. We didn't deserve waking up today. You and I have done nothing to deserve life. We can't deserve the grace of God. You can't deserve salvation. We don't deserve God's love and total acceptance of us as we are. You can't earn it. It's all a gift. All is grace. All is mercy. All is free.

Grace is a gift, but so is the law. It was never either/or. It was always both. That's good news. And the equally good news is that I could preach this sermon here and at St. Ignatius Loyal with no issues. It might be a bit long for a Catholic congregation, but there'd be no theological problem.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen