

SERMON

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

460 East Main Street

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Delighting in the Word

Psalm 1

February 17, 2019

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Psalm 1

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
 or take the path that sinners tread,
 or sit in the seat of scoffers;
 but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on (God's) law they meditate day and night.
 They are like trees planted by streams of water,
 which yield their fruit in its season,
 and their leaves do not wither.
 In all that they do, they prosper.
 The wicked are not so,
 but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
 Therefore—the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
 for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
 but the way of the wicked will perish.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

My friend KC Ptomey was a pastor in the Nashville area who once told me about what once happened in an adult Sunday School he was teaching. He said they were talking about the ways in which the world is becoming more secular, which led to a discussion about the waning influence of the Christian moral and ethical tradition. At some point, a man sitting in one of the rows of folding chairs raised his hand and said, “This is too complicated. Just give it to me in several bullets on one side of an 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper.”

It's a sentiment many of us share. Every time I think back to what KC described, I think about some lines from a poem by Ann Weems, who was a Presbyterian poet and writer. She writes

*Sometimes
 in the stress of life
 we feel overwhelmed
 by the responsibility*

of faithfulness.

Sometimes
we feel
that we are right
and others,
equally as faithful,
feel that they are right.

O God, wouldn't it have been easier
on all of us
if you had written down the rules?—
if you had spelled it out?
NO DANCING
Or
DANCING OKAY.

This freedom thing
that you have handed us
is not easy...not easy at all.
Perhaps the question is not about dancing
(or all the other choices we Christians argue about);
Perhaps the question of faithfulness has to do with
what is written on our hearts.¹

Have you ever felt that way? We long for a clear, simplified statement of what God expects and what we ought to do. Many of us want a list of instructions that will help us to apply the brakes to an out-of-control culture that is careening down the tracks toward inevitable disaster.

What should we do when people of good faith have vastly different understandings about what faithfulness requires of us—whether to build a wall, or tear it down. Whether to welcome the stranger, or seek to protect. Any honest reading of our world reflects so many places that are messy—where our understanding is only in part.

I've been here long enough to know that you know this truth well.

In fact, that's one of the first things I noticed about you as I met the people you elected to serve on your Pastor Nominating Committee. I found myself wondering how they had managed to stay in the same room. But they not only did that. They also reflected a love for one another as if their different understandings of what faithfulness requires of us didn't matter.

But those questions about what faithfulness requires of us are not only important, they are absolutely necessary in this messy world. And that's one of the reasons I love the Presbyterian Church, because—at our best, we aren't afraid to wrestle with those difficult questions, even when we disagree. It has to do with what we call mutual forbearance. But even deeper than that, is the commitment we make to one another. I have to trust that you believe what you do because you are seeking to be faithful to Jesus Christ, and you must trust that the same is true for me.

So we trust one another within the community of faith that we are seeking to follow in the way of Jesus Christ—even though we sometimes differ about what that commitment requires.

What we are dealing with is what is often called the post-modern world. One young female theologian writing about the situation in today's world writes:

¹ Ann Weems, *Family Faith Stories* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 36.

(When I think of the world today, I think) “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.”²

I wonder: Does that sound familiar to you?

And I also wonder whether you can you hear this echo? “Give it to me in several bullets on one side of an 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper.”

Do you remember the scene that unfolded in Alabama a number of years ago when a judge there wanted to recover our moral center by placing a thirty-ton marble rendering of the Ten Commandments in the courthouse? What he apparently forgot is that people of faith figured out long ago that ten commandments aren’t enough. The simple list of ten bullets on two tablets became almost immediately six hundred and thirteen bullets because God’s people couldn’t decide exactly what simple instructions meant, like “You shall remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.” Well, does that mean you can’t get an ox out of the ditch or minister to someone who is sick?

People long for a simple and clear statement of what is right and what is wrong. It would be nice to have it boiled down to a several bullets on one page of letter-sized paper. The trouble is, we disagree about which bullets ought to be included.

When we begin to try to clarify what laws we will live by, we run into trouble because we can’t agree on which ones count and which ones we will ignore.

But it’s even more complicated than that.

Walter Brueggemann, a wonderful OT scholar, thinks that we’re hung up on the whole notion of the law itself. Since Martin Luther, Protestants have insisted on a dichotomy of grace and law.

“Grace alone,” Luther insisted; and we have taken this to mean that “works” must be avoided at all costs because following law, emphasizing obedience, leads us away from salvation by grace and right down the path to “works righteousness.” Taken to the extreme, you will hear teachers in the Protestant classroom inadvertently slip into something that we really don’t believe. What you will hear is that the Old Testament is about salvation by works or law, but that the New Testament is about grace. It’s as if when Jesus came along, the Ten Commandments were banished.

So there are problems with the law everywhere we turn. Which laws do we follow? Or, is it law or grace?

It doesn’t even seem possible to delight in the law of God, because this law thing is a problem. Our world seems increasingly lawless, increasingly approving of a style of individualism that yields to no higher authority; but at the same time, we want some sort of moral order, some abiding principles to live by—just some bullets on a single page.

I hope by now you are beginning to recognize the opportunity presented us by Psalm 1. Not unlike Psalm 19 or Psalm 119, the first psalm is a celebration of God’s law and what the life of those who delight in the law will look like, and what it might mean for the world.

The Psalter itself begins with this: Happy is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord.” And you need to know that Israel’s understanding of the law is not limited to ten commandments or even six hundred and thirteen. It is the whole first five books of the Bible

² Serene Jones, “Bounded Openness: Postmodernism, Feminism, and the Church Today,” *Interpretation Journal* (January 2001), 49-50.

that we know as “the law.” And, it’s easy to miss, but just as there are five books in the “the law,” there are five sections to the Book of Psalms.

Clearly, the editor of the Psalter wanted us to notice something, namely, that there is an analogy between God’s law and the psalms. The psalms—not just Psalm 1 and Psalm 19 and Psalm 119—not just the obvious ones, but the whole of the Psalter is a celebration of God’s law.

Obviously, the psalmist understands that at the deepest level God’s law is not problematic, confining, or restrictive. The law is not something to be dismissed as somehow contradictory to human freedom. The law is life giving. The Book of Psalms as the law is an invitation to happiness—to delight.

We begin to understand this delight in the law of God when we remember that, according to the biblical story, law comes well *after* 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, and promises never to destroy us. Noah, however, messes up royally as soon as he steps off the boat, which seems to tell us that we just can’t get it right.

Still, no restrictive, confining law; just God’s love. 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 us a way to become deserving of God’s grace. It’s that God gives us a guide to how to respond to the grace that God has been pouring out upon us since the first day of creation.

This is precisely why Calvin insisted that the congregation should recite the Ten Commandments in worship each Sunday. And do you know where this act of worship was located in Calvin’s liturgy? After the Assurance of Forgiveness. Do you see why? It was not there as a suggestion of how to please God and receive God’s forgiveness, but as a response to that forgiveness.

It’s not gospel or law, or gospel against law. It’s both/and. Another way to put it is this: God loves us, no perquisites, no deserving implied. AND that kind of love includes, indeed gives birth to, incredible expectations. The law is the guide and clue to the shape of our gratitude.

God’s law, wrapped in God’s grace, is where happiness can be found. “Happy are they who delight in the law of God.”

May these days ahead find you eager to delight in God’s Word and may you discover your happiness by keeping the law in response to the grace that God has poured out upon you.

And now, as the people whom God has gathered here to send forth into the world that God loves, let us stand together to say not only what we believe, but also what we resolve to do:

An Affirmation of Faith:

**Dedicated to Jesus Christ,
we are committed to making a difference
by caring for one another,
growing in our ministries,
and reaching beyond ourselves.**