

The Lord's Law helps us be covenant people

Ex 20:1-17; Ps 19; I Cor 1:18-25; John 2:13-22

The leading cause of hospitalization in Canada continues to be heart disease and stroke. This accounts for 16.9 % of total hospitalizations. Heart disease and stroke costs the Canadian economy more than \$22.2 billion every year in physician services, hospital costs, lost wages and decreased productivity. Heart disease is the number one killer in Canada. About 30% of Canadians who die this year will die from a heart related condition.

There are some frightening statistics that point to the cause of heart disease. The Japanese eat very little fat and suffer fewer heart attacks than Canadians. The French eat a lot of fat and also suffer fewer heart attacks than Canadians. The Chinese drink very little red wine and suffer fewer heart attacks than Canadians. The Italians drink excessive amounts of red wine & also suffer fewer heart attacks than Canadians. The Germans drink a lot of beers and eat lots of sausages and fats and suffer fewer heart attacks than Canadians. So apparently it is speaking English that will kill us!

But the reality is, regardless of what language we speak, most of us start with a healthy heart. There are a few anomalies and sometimes we will hear of a child who has been born with a heart problem but for the most part we start with a healthy heart that will do what very few if any human made pumps could do, and that is pump continually for up to a hundred years or beyond without having parts replaced.

So how does that relate to us individually as Christ followers and collectively as his church? Well, the Bible, the Word of God uses the word heart hundreds of times from the first time it is mentioned in the book of Genesis until the last time it is mentioned in the book of Revelation. Only in a few instances does it refer to the organ that beats in our chests. Instead it refers to our love, our loyalty and our attitudes, toward God, others and each other.

We have looked at God's covenant with Noah. It's God's heart wanting to start over again with us because of our sinfulness when we break his heart. Last week we looked at God's covenant with Abraham and the call to have hearts that deny self & follow Jesus. God called out a people, Abram's spiritual descendants, and blesses the world through them. Today we look at God's Mosaic covenant of OT laws, which include the 10 Commandments. These are given to help us have healthy hearts.

Humanity must have a covenant with God to live rightly. Human life is not self existent. So God keeps offering us guidance, a restart, and reboot. The Bible is the story of our Creator continually reaching out to us to restore us to his original dream of peace with creation, peace with each other and peace with Him. The Almighty keeps trying to transplant us with new hearts – that delight in the things of God.

Notice that covenant is what God will do. That's how covenants with God work. God promises to do something and the covenant means we can count on Him doing it. It is not the same when we sign a contract & you agree to do this and I agree to do that and we both benefit. God's agreements are things He commits to doing for us. God initiated, determined the conditions, and confirmed his covenant with humanity. It is unilateral. This means, people are recipients, not contributors; they are not expected to offer elements to the bond; they are called to accept it as offered, to keep it as demanded, and to receive the results that God, by oath, assures will not be withheld.

That takes our efforts at pleasing God right out of the picture. God knows us only too well. All we have to do is look at history and our own selves. Romans 8:8 says, "Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God." But then in Romans 5:6 it says, there is another covenant. "When we were powerless, Christ died for the ungodly." Jesus in John said, even though the temple is destroyed, meaning, he is killed, in three days he will rebuilt it, meaning he will rise from the dead.

We are in heart relationship with a God whose foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, as the scripture from First Corinthians tells us. So we need relational guidelines that give us some ideas of what pleases our Creator. But we know rigidly adhering to rules has the potential to cause us to sin, to have ungraceful hearts.

I think that's why the people who put the lectionary scriptures together combined our four texts today. We read the 10 Commandments. We heard the perplexing story of Jesus angrily cleaning out the temple, with the backdrop of the legalism of the Jewish religious leaders. Then we are told, "The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Plus we have a beautiful psalm about God's glory in creation and in the law. It includes these ideas: "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the LORD are sure, making wise the simple."

But we tend to not like laws – at least when they are applied to us. We usually have reasons governmental laws and God's laws should not apply to us. These days I tend to use my cruise control – to avoid a ticket, but when someone passes me, & I see them stopped a few kilometers down the road, I can't help but have a self-righteous smile. And I think – I'm glad you are the sacrifice to the speed god, and not me.

We have a love hate relationship with laws. When we benefit – we love them. When they impinge on what we want – we feel frustrated. We have a three way built in tension between appreciating laws, resisting laws, and rigidly adhering to them.

What do I mean by rigidly adhering to laws? In the New Testament we have Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders in constant conflict, about following all the Jewish religious laws. So when Jesus cleaned out the temple, he was making a statement about proper worship and rigidly following religious laws. He probably cleared out the outer courtyard, where people could buy the animals they needed to have to

offer sacrifices. But the outer courtyard was supposed to be a worship space for non Israelites, who were not allowed to go into the inner courtyards. And it made the temple, at least that part of it, a market place. It turned parts of the temple into a store, with high prices for only approved animals to sacrifice. It was a way of extorting money from worshippers, many who could not afford it. So Jesus was making the point that in the zeal to help people worship – the religious authorities hearts were corrupting and prohibiting good worship.

To get our minds around the temptation and dynamic to apply laws rigidly, here's a story. In one of my consultations with a church, I interviewed a couple who had deliberately chosen to become Mennonite. Wonderful – until I heard more. They told me how they had done a rigorous study of many denominations to decide which one was the best one to join. They chose Mennonite. The church they joined was the only Mennonite one for miles around.

But their view of how Mennonites should believe & behave, went back to the Reformation. They were rigid about this as well as self-righteous. So much so, as far as I could figure out – no one else came close to their positions on theology, church life & traditions. This is when I experienced that some converts, become over converted. They were so focused on dos and don'ts, there were no other options. There was no grace. Just law. Tradition. Only one right way – their way. They could not see or give room for human complexity and personal situations. They saw life as black and white, with no grays. They fulfilled my expectation of what a Jewish religious leader of Jesus' time was like. They were like the elder brother in the story of the prodigal son. No grace or joy. In my opinion they had a heart problem.

We live in this tension between law and grace, rules and flexibility, rightness and love. This is one of Pope Francis continual themes. He wrote, "Behind an attitude of rigidity there is always something else in the life of a person. Rigidity is not a gift of God. Meekness is;

goodness is; benevolence is; forgiveness is. But rigidity isn't! They do not know how to walk in the path indicated by God's Law. They appear good because they follow the Law; but they are concealing something else: either they are hypocritical or they are sick. They suffer!"

Pope Francis also wrote, it is his hope "that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: 'Give them something to eat' (Mk 6:37)." This sounds like he's urging us – open up your hearts!

So we live in this tension. It's a continuum. Rigidity on one end and no standards on the other. We know Jesus' harshest words were for the Jewish religious leaders – he called them hypocrites a number of times. So we need the commandments of Exodus 20. They show God's people what a relationship between them and God should look like, as well as how to treat one another. Relational guidelines are necessary but have the potential to get in the way if we forget the purpose of those rules which is, to help us respect one another and be kind, rather than keep each other in line.

What's the difference between the concept of the letter of the law versus the spirit of the law? This may be one way that we might seek God's will rather than rigidly apply rules. But we know we have the infinite capacity to fool ourselves. To twist logic. To only accept logic and facts that we support, that don't challenge our ideas and preferences. So there are times we too need to clean out our temples. And we always need to follow God's rules.

Plus as Psalm 19 tells us, we are to delight in God's law. It's not a heavy, burdensome, challenging set of rules to maintain, but a lovely, life-giving, sweet and sure word from God. At least that how King David, a well known law breaker felt about God's laws. This is different from fearing the law, or being mad

about its limits on our lives. It's also not using the law as a weapon – on ourselves or others.

We don't have time to look at Ps. 19 in depth, so I urge you to read it and reread it. Meditate on it. Notice what it says about delighting in God's laws. I'll be preaching on this in the future at the nursing homes. Following these laws helps us respond properly to the Creator's covenant with us. Living them helps us grow hearts that honor and delight our Creator. Let's reflect again how David describes God's covenant law and their benefits.

Congregation Read Ps 19:7-11 (813 MWB)

⁷ The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
⁹ the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.
¹¹ Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.

How desperately we need the help of God's laws. When we delight in God's law, our eyes are opened with understanding and truth. It's what we are to desire and enjoy and be devoted in so God can speak to our hearts, direct us and show us our sins. This helps our hearts have the desire to be kept from sin and be pleasing to a Holy Almighty God. The goal is not sinless perfection, but rather to avoid doing that which is displeasing to God. This helps us be covenant people.

¹⁴ Let the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O LORD, our rock and our redeemer.

The rest of the psalm warns us against sins which we commit inadvertently and of sins which we commit willfully. It warns us of hidden faults – those we have a hard time discerning. God’s Word keeps us back from presumptuous sins, sins which we willfully commit or think we can get away with. God gave his word not to just fill our heads, but to fill our hearts. God’s laws are designed to make us holy, not just smart. Reading God’s laws helps us avoid falling into sin.

Hebrews 4:12 promises us that, “the word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, or both joints and marrow and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” How desperately we need this help. When we delight in God’s law, our eyes are opened with understanding and truth. It’s what we are to desire and delight and be devoted in so God can speak to our hearts, direct us and show us our sins. This helps our hearts have the desire to be kept from sin and be pleasing to a Holy Almighty God. The goal is not sinless perfection, but rather to avoid doing that which is displeasing to God.