

Law School
Readings from the New Testament: John 1:14; Colossians 1:15
Reading from the Old Testament: Deuteronomy 4:1-9

In the Jewish Talmud it is written, "Fish die when they are out of water, and people die without law and order." The political theorist Hannah Arendt was a German Jew who survived arrest by the Gestapo when they targeted Arendt upon her investigation of antisemitism. She would eventually settle in New York. Hannah Arendt had witnessed the ignominious submission of her homeland to Nazi ideology and the subsequent and horrific societal transformation and ethnic cleansing wrought by the Third Reich. Certainly, Arendt's experience would inform her understanding of the role of law in society. She said, "No civilization would ever have been possible without a framework of stability, to provide the wherein for the flux of change. Foremost among the stabilizing factors, more enduring than customs, manners and traditions, are the legal systems that regulate our life in the world and our daily affairs with each other."

Where there is no law, chaos quickly fills the void; just ask any kindergarten teacher, driver's ed instructor, Target manager, plant foreman, traffic cop, or for that matter, the teenage ride operators at

Carowinds (you know, those handrailed aisles weren't erected for aesthetics).

Free range parent at your own risk, but that won't isolate the wild ones from the necessity of some structure, some reasonable collective of what we are to expect from one another in order that we may live together with a modicum of peace.

Toilet seat up, toilet seat down in proper order for mixed company; Green means go, red means stop, and at least in Charlotte, we're not real clear about what yellow means; Spring forward, Fall back; no plastic bags in the recycle bin; no hard soled shoes on the gym floor; click it or ticket; when in doubt, put slaw on it; and that punch you want to throw? Don't.

Our Federal Judiciary states that "the rule of law is a principle under which all persons, institutions, and entities are accountable to laws that are: "Publicly promulgated; Equally enforced; Independently adjudicated; And consistent with international human rights principles." Yes, we must acknowledge that except for the law of love there is no such thing as a perfect law, and certainly, flaws are to be

found and injustices are wrought in the enforcement of whatever laws we have. Yet life without the law is far more uncertain and dangerous than life with the law.

Law, we chafe against it, complain about it, have been known to transgress it, but typically assume our innocence and presume the guilt of others in the breaking of it. Where there is no law there can be no justice, and where there is no justice, there can be no community.

If you've flown internationally, you are familiar with those video maps on the seatback, showing you the progress of the flight. You watch a movie or two, take a nap, and then look up at the map, yet it seems like the plane hasn't moved at all even though the pilot says you are flying 560 miles an hour. Well, imagine if the pilot said, "We'll be touching down at our destination in approximately 40 years." Delivered from slavery's injustice in Egypt, the heirs of Abraham ever so slowly inched their way toward a promised land, a journey with a most propitious layover at Mt. Horeb where Moses ascended to receive the Law of God. These commands were to provide the framework, the structure for life with God and one another as they sought to become the people of God.

When these wanderers reached Moab, the territory to the east of the Jordan River, Moses instructed the people as they prepared to cross the Jordan into the land promised to them, but this was more than the typical *place your seats in the upright position* kind of instruction. If this wandering group of former slaves was to live together and form a nation, they would need to build upon the foundation of the Law received upon Mount Horeb by Moses from God.

"So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you."

"So that you may live..." The law was not meant to be a new form of bondage constraining life but was to provide a structure within which the people could live more freely, unburdened by the insecurity of never knowing what to reasonably expect from each other. It is restrictive only in regard to the impulses that would undermine our trust in God or injure our neighbor. You shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not covet. Adherence to these commands does not restrict your life but rather opens the way for positive relations with others. In fact, Calvin asserted that each command expressed in

the negative contained within it a positive obligation. For example, the command, *do not kill*, carries with it the obligation to safeguard, consider, look out for, nurture, and benefit the lives of our neighbors. *Do not steal* carries with it the obligation to live generously.

Consider the command *You shall not make for yourself an idol*. That is no arbitrary or irrelevant constraint. Rather, it is a safeguard against illusions that only have dead ends. Jesus affirmed the benefit of this command when he said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." That vintage Camaro looks good in your driveway, but it won't heal your relationship with your estranged sister. Or, as someone related to me this week, you never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul on the way to the cemetery.

Our text counsels us, "I now teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and

discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!"

In this way, the Law is not punitive, but life-giving, providing a framework for us to live with others in ways that make for community, trusting in the One who created us and knows us better than anyone, who knows what we need, what is essential, and what is not.

Of course, the Law, though a gift from God, becomes vulnerable to misinterpretation, overapplication, misuse, and abuse in the hands of sinful humanity. The command to not work on the Sabbath eventually evolved into 39 major categories with hundreds of subcategories of labor that were prohibited based on the types of work that were related to the construction of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, which ceased on the Sabbath.

In addition, the authorities decreed that one should not only avoid these forbidden acts but also must not do anything that (1) resembles a prohibited act or could be confused with it, (2) is a habit linked with a prohibited act, or (3) usually leads to performing a prohibited act. For example, climbing a tree was forbidden on the Sabbath because it could

lead to breaking twigs or tearing leaves, which could be construed as “reaping”; braiding hair was forbidden because it could be linked to the labor of weaving; drawing blood for a blood test was forbidden because of the association with the labor necessary for slaughtering livestock; don't brush the dried mud from your boots on the Sabbath because it could be associated with grinding; opening an umbrella was a no-no because it could be construed as building a shelter.

Needless to say, over time the Law became more onerous than life-giving and the enforcement of the Law by the religious authorities evolved into an exercise ripe for abuse of power. So, when Jesus, the Son of God, the Word of God made flesh, appears on the scene it was one way of God saying, "Whoa, there pilgrims, I think we're missing the point here!"

You see, the intent or spirit of the law was to create a space to live in the presence of God and for one another. So, when Jesus perceived that he could heal someone, make them whole, restore them to community, and make it possible for them to be included in worship, he did it, even if it was on the day of Sabbath, because the spirit of the Law

was to create a space for relationship, and to cut someone off from relationship would undermine the Law rather than enforce it.

That would set Jesus against the religious authorities and the power structure of the Temple, but it would restore the essence of the Law as originally given by God. That's why Jesus told the scribe, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Thus, the whole Law is summarized by four words: Love God; Love Neighbor. Four words that form the structure within which we can experience life most fully for the benefit of all.

And not only does Jesus narrow the essence of the Law to its original life-giving intent, Jesus actually is the embodiment of the whole Law in his person. So, stepping forth into an uncertain, persistently chaotic, and often dangerous world, the Law not only provides us the Word structure within which to build a life (Love God, Love Neighbor), we are also given the model, a picture of what such a life looks like. Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the

law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Of Jesus, Paul said, He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation ... He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together." John calls him "the Word made flesh."

How are we to live together? Love God. Love neighbor. What does this look like? It looks like Jesus. We have the words and the picture. Words and pictures, we learn very early how helpful these can be.

This week, Donna took me back to a very special time in our lives. She had gone to the children's section of the bookstore in search of the treasures she hoped to give to our nephew and niece who are expecting a baby in the next week. Excited to share her purchase with me, we returned to those rich days when our boys were little and we were opening those Sandra Boynton picture books day after day, reading them over and over. You probably know them by heart, "The hog and the frog go out for a jog with the cat and the rats in their new running hats while the moose and the bear and the goose and the hare are doing their best to keep up with the rest ... but not the hippopotamus. Then the animal pack comes running back, saying 'Hey, come join the lot of us.' And she just doesn't know. Should she stay or should she go? (Do

you remember what comes next?) But yes, the hippopotamus ... but not the armadillo.

Like so many children's books it is a wonderful witness to the things that make for life together ... welcome, inclusion, encouraging the introvert. Words and Pictures, it's how we learn.

What do we truly need for life together? Love God. Love neighbor. What does this look like? It looks like Jesus. Amen.