

6th Sunday After The Epiphany – Zach Marshall

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

I would really rather not share the stories I'm going to tell today. And I don't have solutions to the problems that I'm going to raise. But somehow, when I saw the passages for today, I knew that they fit my own story in a unique way, and I felt called to share some of my story.

This is a sermon that has a refrain. That might sound weird, but roll with it. Here's the refrain: ***Humans love laws. And they really love other humans who love the same laws that they do.***

Our passages today come from Deuteronomy 30, Psalm 119, 1 Corinthians 3, and Matthew 5. For me, these are significant passages in terms of how I came to understand Christianity and the Christian life while I was in high school. I grew up in a very conservative Christian home, but I wasn't particularly interested in the religion until I was a freshman in high school and joined a parachurch ministry called Teens For Christ. After I joined this ministry and started to get serious about my faith, I led what is probably a very unusual life for an average American teenager. Here are some of the odd things I did: I attended a theology class on Sunday nights just for fun; I attended a weekly prayer meeting on Saturday nights, also just for fun; I went to a Christian boot camp that promised to make me a better Christian; I watched sermons online while doing my homework—it was the days of dial-up internet, and Willow Creek had a large stash of sermons posted on their website. And I read the Bible incessantly. I honestly expect that I was reading the Bible in its entirety at least twice a year. I read it during my leisure, and I studied a chapter of the Bible closely every night before going to sleep. I know—it's like “confessions of the most boring teenager on the planet.”

As I became more familiar with the Bible, passages like the ones that we read for today started to draw my attention. For one thing, they responded to big questions I had. One really big question was: What does God really want from us humans? Some other big questions were these: is the Pentateuch really as boring as everyone says? (Surely it's there for a good reason?...) From that question came questions such as: shouldn't Christianity be a sub-set of Judaism since Judaism came first? Why aren't we more Jewish? To my teenage self, their religion looked boring without Christmas and Easter, but I felt there had to be some kind of life to it or else why did God start it and why do people still practice it in the 21st century? My involvement in the Christian organization I mentioned had a lot of influence as well. Like I said, I went to a Christian boot camp, which was run through this organization. Now, I know what you're thinking: “I get it: ‘boot camp’ is a *metaphor* for something that really gets you in shape.” Well, I have to tell you: No. “Boot camp” was not a metaphor. They intentionally recruited Christian leaders who were either currently employed in the military or retired from the army to run the

camp in as realistic of a fashion as possible. In theory, the experience was supposed to help teenagers grow in their faith. In practice, it really helped teenagers to grow in their legalism.

Humans love laws. And they really love other humans who love the same laws that they do.

Do you want to hear about the boot camp? Let's see. How can I sketch it for you? Before every meal, there was punishment time. For every meal we ate during the week, the leadership had planned a potential punishment based on some Christian discipline that we teenagers might have omitted in the six months of preparation before going to boot camp. Did I mention that boot camp took place on a remote island within a large lake on an already-remote Canadian island in Lake Huron? Anyway, it would be a frigid June morning. We'd all be standing at attention at morning drill after having our cabin door kicked open and being shouted through the process of cleaning the cabins and getting dressed. They would announce that, before breakfast, if you had neglected to, for example, journal for even one day from January of that year until that day, then you needed to report to the front of the lodge for PE, physical exercise. There were punishments for missing prep meetings, missing church, skipping the Saturday night prayer service, not reading the Bible, and roughly ten other things I can't remember as well. And PE wouldn't only be things like ten pushups, although we did have to do that each time we messed up small things like not saluting a superior officer. At PE, they would have you do things like hold the forward lean rest position (basically the "up" position in a pushup) until people's arms literally gave way beneath the strain. It was always guaranteed to be painful, and the leader who had been through real Army boot camp relished how out of shape we were compared to him.

There was a theme each year. My first year, we were learning about the book of Daniel, and the leaders were committed to giving us a week of experiential learning about what it would be like to be in Daniel and his friends' place, newly arrived as exiles in Babylon. On day one, they took away all markers of our individual identity, including our names. I was told that my name for the week was 839, and if I called anyone by a name other than their number, I would be punished with pushups each time I messed up. On day two, we weren't allowed to use any personal pronouns—"I, me, my, or mine." On day three, we weren't allowed to speak at all. I can't remember day four. Day five, they told us we couldn't practice our Christian faith, and those who did were taken out into the woods for punishment for the rest of the day. When people fainted in the woods because it got so hot in the afternoon and needed medical attention, they took them back to the lodge and treated them, which was good, but then they told the rest of us that those people had given up on their Christianity because they were weak.

I can't remember nearly as much from the second year I went. We studied 1 and 2 Samuel that year. They made all of the male students construct a large tabernacle on the model laid out in the Bible, complete with a gold spray-painted Ark of the Covenant; women were not allowed to help because the Mosaic law forbid their participation. I also recall that we were given the strange

task of playing out a massive drama in which half of us were savage-pagan-native peoples who had to memorize a made-up language, and the rest were white missionaries who had to come and convert us all from our paganism. In another year, when my younger sister went, they asked them to bring six feet of chain—they were studying the two Old Testament books of the Kings and how, by neglecting God’s laws, the people gave themselves over to be conquered by other nations. No one could guess what the chain was for when they left. On day one, they had to wear a chain bracelet on one arm, and they couldn’t take it off even during sleep. On day two, their hands were chained together. On day three, one foot; day four, both feet chained together; day five, hands and feet chained together. At the end of the week, they threw all the chains into the lake, symbolizing how Jesus freed them from the chains of law and sin. That’s not really the part I heard about most when they returned, though.

Anyway, the point is that boot camp was supposed to help us grow in our faith. Don’t you see how that worked? . . . No. Really, it made me understand Christianity as if there were some perfect set of rules to follow. If we could just get our theology perfect, then life would be smooth from here on out. We would know the answer to many of life’s questions, and we would know the nitty-gritty of what actions to do or not do. What job to do. Who to marry. Who to be friends with. Who to shun.

Humans love laws. And they find it very comfortable to love other humans who know the same laws that they do.

So I was very interested in the question of what to do that was right, what God wanted. At this time, I was interested in the book of Deuteronomy. I had a feeling that there must be something to it, coming last in the Pentateuch as it does. Also, my youth pastor had a habit of reminding us about the Shema out of Deuteronomy which was the most basic version of what God wanted from people: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is God, the Lord alone, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, etc. and etc.” He had a habit of reciting it to us in Hebrew. “Shemach Israel, Adonai elohenu, Adonai echad.” So I started to study Deuteronomy, and the passage we read for today was very important. But what I was able to discover as a young person (equipped with a heavy Strong’s Concordance) was that the words of the blessing and cursing were not so interesting as the setup. Moses made a plan—or I suppose God told him to do it—to have half of the tribes of Israel stand on one mountain, Mount Gerazim, to recite the blessings, and the other half of the tribes to stand on Mount Ebal to recite the curses. I thought this was really impressive; I still do. From the flatlands of Ohio, I couldn’t imagine what it would be like to make hundreds of thousands of people stand on two mountains and recite some things in unison. It was a fantastic idea in terms of pageantry. I suppose some people would prefer to call it liturgy. As I was studying Deuteronomy in high school, I also did a keyword search for the word “fire” and realized that God spent a lot of time describing himself as a consuming fire. I’ve heard this a lot, including famously in CCM music, but it never really clicked. I think we’re not really thinking

about what that means. This consuming fire bit is important because part of Moses's message to the people at the two mountains is this: "Remember back at that other mountain, you know, Mt. Sinai, the one that was on fire because God was visiting it? Yeah, well you told me then that you didn't want to interact with that fire, so here's a long and complex law, which will lead to a series of blessings if you follow it and curses if you don't." Back there, they saw what a consuming fire was really like, and they saw Moses go up into it. And they didn't like it. So when Moses gave them the law, they accepted that.

Humans love to hide behind laws. And they really love other humans who hide behind the same laws that they do.

When I was given the opportunity to lead a Bible study for the full chapter of my local Christian ministry, I really wanted to illustrate this part about the mountain on fire. I thought the fire was so significant. So I found a large flagstone from my driveway, and during the Bible study, I propped it up on a cookie sheet, anointed it in rubbing alcohol (yes, anointed is the technical term), and set it on fire. My point was that it's really surprising to see a rock burn, that if a rock is burning, then something really must be wrong, even more than if a bush was burning for a really long time. I don't know whether my point got across. I don't really think it could; mostly people were relieved that the fire didn't catch on the carpet or set off the fire alarms.

Moses doesn't exactly talk about the fire in this ceremony, though. He says *See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors.* It's an ultimatum. Yes, there's the part about loving the Lord your God, but how do these people learn to express that love? By following the ordinances.

The authoritative voices of youth leaders led me to other scriptural passages about "God's law." I remember that they loved a verse in the Psalms, not in Psalm 119 but in Psalm 19: *The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul.* For some of them, it was another mantra, like the Shema. At any rate, this line of thinking directed me to sources like Psalm 119, which in addition to being the longest chapter in the Bible by verse count is also all about how wonderful and important and sacred are the laws of God. Now, most of you know, I bet, that Psalm 119 is an alphabet acrostic poem thing. There are eight-verse sections for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and all the verses start with the same letter. It's basically a longer version of those extremely lame acrostics that people write. You know, you see them a lot on the backs of sports T-shirts. The words are arranged one on top of the other so that it spells the word on the left-hand side going down, like "together everyone achieves more" for the word "TEAM." I remember that around this time when I was a high school senior, I got the great idea of memorizing all 176 verses of Psalm 119. Anyway, my idea was to write out by hand eight verses at a time on a sheet

of notebook paper, going by the letter that headed each section. I would carry this paper with me for one week, including when I went on long runs for track practice, and I would recite the words of the verses over and over until I knew them, building upon them in subsequent weeks by reciting from the start. So in week one, I read what we read for today.

Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD.

Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways.

You have commanded your precepts to be kept diligently.

O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping your statutes!

Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.

I will praise you with an upright heart, when I learn your righteous ordinances.

I will observe your statutes; do not utterly forsake me.

You know what's odd though? It didn't really work. I can't really remember any of those verses anymore, despite the time I put in. I can remember the road I ran down and the look and smell of the yellow grass of early March, and the way I folded the paper into sixteenths, but not the verses. The problem was that they were all so very similar. Even with what we have today, they are all very similar. It's all about keeping statues, keeping decrees, keeping commandments, keeping ordinances, keeping them diligently. There's a little praise and a little learning thrown in. As far as good poetry goes, there's not much imagery. Okay, there's none actually. And before you try to tell me about the chiasmic structure of Hebrew poetry, and how I shouldn't confuse my modern conventions for historical poetry, yeah, yeah, I know all that stuff. Can we just admit that David wasn't that great a poet, or maybe he wasn't that great a follower of God, or maybe both? The best part of the whole thing is the end: *Do not utterly forsake me*. But wait—what was that?! Why is God going to forsake you, let alone utterly forsake you, when you're making all these promises to keep his statutes? I have trouble reading these lines now without hearing them as the desperate statements of somebody who knows they really screwed up with the boss and needs to get on their good side but thinks that the only way to do it is by schmoozing and saying what they think the boss wants to hear. But in the end, it just ends up sounding like an empty, too late kind of apology. It's hollow. There's no substance there. Unless you count the plea of desperation. Maybe that's the best clue in these verses.

There was one other place I turned to try to find an answer to my questions about how to be a really good Christian, how to please God and live a good life. It was the Sermon on the Mount in

Matthew 5. To me, out of all the things that Jesus said (which were mostly parables) and all the things that Jesus did (which were often miracles), the Sermon on the Mount was what made sense. And I understood it in the sense that I heard most pastors say it is supposed to be understood. Jesus' message is consistently that you can't just follow the commandment; even thinking about the sin is as bad as committing it. You think murder is bad? Well, anger is just as bad. You think adultery is bad? Lust is just as bad. You think divorce is bad? Yes, it is. And don't swear. It's kind of a legalist's dream come true. In a weird way, what Jesus does by making the law not just external but also internal is very like the concept of thought crime in 1984 by George Orwell. Anyway, I read the Sermon on the Mount a lot, especially the beatitudes, but also these bits from today's reading. I read Dietrich Bonhoeffer's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, hoping that that would help me to somehow unlock its secrets and learn how to live the good life, the life of doing exactly what God wanted. And I loved all of it! Because this part of the Bible led me to the tightest corner yet—it told me what I should and shouldn't think. I was a teenager, attending a fundamentalist church and a fundamentalist extra-curricular Christian organization, and I was too focused on figuring out what felt to me like a really big problem—exactly how to have the right kind of biblical legalism.

And I know what the Church says the answer to that personal problem is. Jesus takes away the need to be so focused on a legalistic code, like those chains my sister threw in a lake in Canada—yes, I get the concept of penal substitutionary atonement. But then why does the Church that is so focused on this message of atonement actually do a better job of convincing people that it's about following the right rules? I know, it's an old question, but it's a question that has only gotten more and more acute as I've gotten older. I see the Church and Christian organizations being very focused and very concerned with following somewhat obscure parts of the law, such as the laws about homosexuality. But many other parts of the law are ignored, including parts that are literally tearing our world apart, such as the prohibition against charging interest on money lent to someone else. We see this kind of thinking—being liberated from the Law—coming out in 1 Corinthians, which was another important book to high school me. But I don't think that we're very good at understanding this idea of liberation from God's law. High school me was more familiar with Corinthians because of the way Paul sorted out laws about things like eating meat sacrificed to idols. Corinthians often gets used in a way similar to the Sermon on the Mount. Such as this: Paul says it's technically not wrong to eat meat sacrificed to idols, but if someone else might have a problem with it, then you'd better not. It's, like, the perfect justification for keeping something that we were supposed to get rid of. I don't want to get rid of this rule because, what if someone else needs it? I don't have a problem with people who have differently-colored skin sitting at the same lunch-counter as me—I don't have a problem with women preaching—but if someone else does, then we'd better not allow that. Especially if it's the people who donate money to our cause or our institutions. We don't want to move too quickly and offend our brothers and sisters, particularly the wealthy ones.

Humans love laws. And they feel much more comfortable around other humans who follow the same laws that they do.

I've changed a lot since then. And I didn't get answers to many of my questions, including "How do we grapple with the millennia-long history of legalism in our religious tradition?" I like to think that Jesus really did change all of that, but I find more often than not that whatever it was that he was actually saying was way scary, and we Christians are going to wait until we get a confirmation from heaven before we go out on a limb.

I only know of one way out at this point in my life. It's this: the Bible is not a rule book. Perhaps it never was supposed to be. It's a story, as true as any, and no less powerful for that, but it's not a rule book. I know this might sound bad to you, but let's go there for a second: maybe Moses messed up! Obviously, the Israelites who asked to avoid God and have a law instead messed up! Maybe David distracted us with his pious-sounding psalms! Well, maybe. Maybe Jesus didn't mean the Sermon on the Mount that way. Maybe he was really trying to trap any self-righteous listeners by testing not whether they could follow the rules but whether they could be honest with themselves and then to see what they would do when they really saw themselves. Maybe Paul was wrong. Maybe we have to trust that God is bigger than any person who questions our apparently lawless actions. Well, maybe.

So why have all of these passages about the divine law and following it come together today? I guess I don't know. I didn't design the lectionary. Why did they all come together in me? I suppose because, like a lot of people, I was searching for something. Because the church and Christian organizations I came of age in told me that there was a basic moral code there, if only I'd look hard enough. And now I'm pretty sure that that's not the point. You know, the vast majority of people I went to Christian boot camp with are no longer practicing Christians. They gave it up, many of them soon after boot camp. I imagine it's the shame that comes with legalism. There's a deep sense of self-loathing that you learn as a Christian. We are sinners. Life offers us a fairly simple way out of this shame: establish some laws and follow them. Then you'll have a measuring stick to start stacking up your self-worth against, and (this is the really delicious part) you'll have reasons to look down upon other people who are not as pious as you. You'll have a tool to use to shame other people. And that will help you to assuage your own self-loathing. And the best part of all is that other people will come to value the same laws as you, and you'll have a sense of community, rapport with like-minded people. If you follow their laws, they will extend the right hand of fellowship to you. They will help you up into the higher plane of living that they're on. They will write your name in the club ledger. They feel so good that another person in this confusing old world has validated their way of seeing it. It gives them some comfort—almost as much comfort as excluding the people who don't share their laws.

Maybe this is what Paul is really thinking about when he cautions people from aligning with himself or Apollos. This ain't a competition, folks.

Now, one more note for you all. It's nice to think that this is a story about some radical conservative fundies who still, even in June 2020, will run a Christian boot camp on a remote island in Canada. We're not like them. But that's not fully true. It's us too. We too have our groups, our preferred laws, our factions. It would be difficult not to. And as we get ready to meet Jesus in the fire of transfiguration and then embark with him into the desert of Lent, we should really think about this part of ourselves in a new way.

Humans love laws. And they find their justification, their purpose, their reason to exist, their joie de vivre, in other humans who love the same laws that they do.

May we find ways to break the cycle.