

The Law and Grace – Teresa Holden

Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20; Psalm 19; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

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“Scripture is like a river, both broad and deep, shallow enough here for the lamb to go wading, but deep enough there for the elephant to swim.”

These are the words of Gregory the Great (also known as Pope Gregory the First), and I like his statement because I think it’s descriptive of our Scriptures for today. We have both the basic (the 10 Commandments) and the complex (why and how it is that Jesus’ life on earth was a gift of grace that superseded the Law). Gregory the Great lived in the 6th Century. As the churches’ leader, he encouraged the creation of church art that reminded churchgoers of Bible stories, as the vast majority of them were unable to read. Gregory valued the fact that this type of art added new shades of meaning to believers’ understanding of Scripture. In the spirit of Gregory the Great, we are going to look at several works of art that will be projected on the wall throughout the sermon today. To begin with, we have this illuminated manuscript that originates from Gregory’s time. This comes from the Ashburnham Pentateuch, a collection of illustrated manuscripts that depicts scenes from the first five books of the Old Testament. This manuscript is telling a story about Moses and the Israelites receiving the Ten Commandments. You can notice that it also links the Old Testament story with the New Testament Church through a very familiar element that is a part of our regular worship here at St. Paul’s. We’ll talk more about that later, but if you start to doze off, you can think about how our Scripture readings and the sermon parallel the ideas in the picture.

Typically, I teach the History of Western Civilization twice a year. Every time I teach about the ancient world, I am struck all over again by what a dark, cold and brutal world it was. The earliest civilizations we know about, ones that developed in the Tigris-Euphrates region, lived in formidable environmental conditions. (Remember, that area is modern day Iraq which has devastating heat and wind in the summer and limited rainfall.) Religiously, these people lacked a concept of an afterlife. These were grim and hopeless people.

Early on, in order to establish structure for the Babylonian society, their ruler, Hammurabi, developed a recorded law, one version of which was etched into an 8 foot high, black stone for all to see. As we can see, the stone was shaped like an index finger, apparently pointing to the heavens, as a reminder that the Babylonian god, Marduk, was watching them. (At the top we see Hammurabi and Marduk having a little chat.) Hammurabi made sure everyone in his kingdom knew that this system of justice came from his own head (as he claimed he was Marduk’s representative on earth), and his law prescribed logical consequences for misbehavior

or mistakes. The concept of “an eye for an eye” comes from Hammurabi’s code, and it literally says that if one messes up someone else’s eye, then their punishment would be having their own eye messed up. Hammurabi’s code demanded that the lowest class, the slave class, pay respect to the elite class, and there were differing punishments for people of different social classes. Unlike the Babylonians, another early civilization, the Egyptians, certainly believed in an afterlife, but their gods, like all of the supposed gods of these early polytheistic civilizations, acted arbitrarily, without particular concern for the well-being of human life, unless humans worked extra-hard to appease them.

The Hebrew God, however, was different. He, unlike the false gods of the surrounding polytheistic civilizations, entered into a series of covenants with the Jewish people, to whom He revealed Himself and for whom He delivered on promises of deliverance and blessing. He made demands on His people that were based upon a transcendent standard of justice. Unlike the law of other civilizations of the ancient world, the law of the Hebrew God made the same demands on all. Leaders, or the elite, were not above the law, nor did they gain special dispensation to satisfy their own earthly appetites. As we see in today’s Scripture from Exodus, the portion of the Hebrew law that we call the 10 Commandments was personally passed from God to Moses, and it demanded a standard of conduct that, at its core, suggested a new kind of community. Not only was one not to carry out the actual act of adultery, one was not to think about his neighbor’s wife in such a way that adultery was carried out in his mind. (We see here the beginnings of an ethic of love – where one considers others, rather than being selfish.) Moses told the Israelites that God’s objective was to challenge them to not sin, an altogether different objective than simply keeping order in society. Psalm 19:9 repeats this theme, saying: “the ordinances of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.” So we see here the Jewish belief in a standard of righteousness that is true and originates with God. The problem, of course, for the Israelites, and for us today is living up to this standard that is nothing short of perfection.

For Jewish people in the Old Testament, the Law allowed them a way to make up for their inability to attain perfection, and that was through prayer and through making sacrifices of animals to God. This action of regularly sacrificing animals in order to gain forgiveness for sins is very hard for us to wrap our heads around in the 21st Century, but for Hebrews in the Old Testament, it was the normal course of life. The animal’s loss of blood that resulted in its death was said to cover up the Israelites sins, so that their sins were virtually taken away. The animal’s blood satisfied the need for someone’s blood to be shed for sin. Despite the normalcy that this action took on, there was a hint in Hebrew teachings that at some point this system would go away, would be no longer, and that would be when the Messiah came.

The coming of Jesus is an historical turning point with which nothing else can compare. Let me illustrate: a few years back I changed how I teach my Western Civilization class from using a book that was sympathetic to Christianity to one that is much more secular in its worldview. I did this for a number of reasons. For one, it had better maps and pictures and it was just more interesting. Another reason was that I thought it was useful to intentionally stretch my students’

ability to think critically about our subject and to develop ways of explaining a Christian worldview in light of a secular perspective that isn't Christian. So my assignments challenge them to do that. The remarkable thing about this secular text (which I also think is valuable for my students to see) is it also recognizes that Jesus' ministry was the single-most important turning point in history. By recognizing this, the text doesn't say that this is because the Savior of the world came to redeem mankind so that all can be in relationship with God – there are no religious overtones to its depiction. Rather, it just makes the point that everything changed after Jesus. This is an unintentional reinforcement of why we Christians believe.

We see in today's Scripture how unsettling the actual events of Jesus' life and ministry were to Jewish leaders of his day, particularly those who had a stake in maintaining the status quo. They just couldn't accept that something so much more important than them was taking place right in front of them. All they could do was try to figure out how to make this problem go away. They wanted to figure out strategies to silence Jesus, so that He (hopefully) would be merely a little blip, not the world's largest earthquake on the seismograph of history.

In our Matthew reading, Jesus irritates particularly the Pharisees, as he tells this story that suggests they are missing the bigger point God is making through Him. To understand this more clearly, it's important to know that the Pharisees were to the Jewish people, what the Puritans were to the Church of England in the 17th Century. The Puritans were so devout in their Calvinist beliefs that they believed they were assigned by God to critique and bring greater orthodoxy to the Church of England. Similarly, the Pharisees believed that they were the only Jews who were maintaining the orthodoxy of the Jewish faith. This is why they had so many problems with Jesus. When He healed on the Sabbath, they couldn't reconcile His doing this really good thing with the fact that by doing it, He broke the Jewish law of resting from all labor on the Sabbath. Here, in Jesus' parable of the Master trying to get his tribute from his tenants, He equates the Jewish leaders, these Pharisees, with the tenants who abused and killed all of the Master's representatives, finally even killing his son. Jesus ends the story with a sort of ultimatum. There is no getting around Him - He is the rock that the Pharisees (who see themselves as builders of the faith) are rejecting; He is the most important rock, the cornerstone, without which the whole faith falls apart.

This idea of having the awareness to see the potential in stone is something I am very unfamiliar with, so I talked with our own Sculptor Steve Heilmer, who is an expert in this topic, to help me learn about how anyone would ever have this ability. Steve talked to me about intuition, vision and passion. He even gave me an article to read, all of which I deeply appreciate, but I came to the conclusion that this process (of being able to identify the potential in a stone) mirrors our experience of faith. It is very hard to put into words. That's why art serves us so well; it can help us to highlight nuances of meaning that we can't find words to describe. Steve gives us a perfect example of this through his own work. I want to show you one of Steve's most remarkable depictions of faith, to help us understand the gift of grace Jesus was trying to explain through the metaphor of stone. This is Steve's work, called the Gratia Plena, which he also calls Mother's Milk. This is a work he was commissioned to sculpt by

Seattle University, and it stands today in their Chapel of St. Ignatius. I'm going to offer my own interpretation of this work – to me it depicts the gift of Christ that came to us through normal means, through a human mother, Mary. She, like mothers world-wide since the beginning of time, provided the sustenance for the most remarkable and transcendent gift of grace the world will ever know, Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

Steve sculpted this out of an eight foot slab of Carrarra marble. Carrarra, which is in Tuscany, Italy, is a very special place for marble, and many of the world's greatest sculptors like Steve and Michelangelo believe that the marble there is unmatched anywhere in the world. For one thing, as you can see, it has the distinction of being white, which makes it perfect for this particular sculpture. Picking the right slab of marble to match the design of a sculpture takes an experienced and discriminating eye, and Steve returned the initial marble that he was sent because he knew it wasn't going to allow him to achieve his goal with the work. Terry Dempsey, who is Director of the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art in St. Louis, describes the finished sculpture very well, when he says, "The surfaces on the marble are simply stunning. What is amazing is that it is all one stone. Steve truly has suspended liquid in motion." This is amazing, but particularly when we look at this sculpture in contrast to the stone stele, as it's called, that Hammurabi's code was etched on.

These two pieces of stone, taken together, can help us to gain a better understanding of the differences between law and grace. Both are eight feet tall; both are made from one piece of stone. One points up, like a raised finger (don't you dare mess up); the other is spilling over with grace, that suggests hope and the possibility for everyone to walk in the light of God's grace. Religious law, even God's law, in the hands of humans quickly becomes a list of legalisms. These legalisms lose God's transcendent purpose and become disconnected from Him and His grace. God, through the person of Jesus, asserted that the Jewish law was limited; and that all of those animal sacrifices were just a simile. The shedding of animal blood was a little bit like the actual sacrifice of the one human being in the history of the world who could live up to God's challenge to walk away from sin. Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate sign of God's love and grace for all mankind. His resurrection is the one great hope of the world.

Paul came to understand the difference between law and grace when he had a miraculous, personal encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. Remember he literally was brought to his knees when Jesus appeared to him in a bright flash of light that left him temporarily blinded as he was traveling to Damascus to take Christians as prisoners because of their faith. In our passage from Philippians, Paul describes himself before his conversion as a Pharisee who was blameless before the Jewish law. Yet, upon his conversion, he gave up his self-righteous attachment to the Law. Here, Paul speaks with poignant conviction about His relationship with Jesus, saying, "I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God

based on faith.” For Christians, God’s call to righteousness and away from sin is something that we can accomplish by faith because of God’s grace.

This brings us back to our illustrated manuscript. Have you spotted the element that brings together the story of Moses with the New Testament Church and also links their faith with ours? It is the bread being brought by the people. These people are just like Morgan who makes the bread for our Communion service. We eat the bread and drink the juice, as the early Christians did because Jesus instructed his disciples (and us) that the bread and juice of the Eucharist should always serve as a reminder of Him, His death on our behalf and the gift of grace He has bestowed on us. May our relationship with Him be as dynamic and passionate as Paul’s, and may we see Him in the gifts and talents we share with one another in His name.