

THE LAW OF LOVE
Psalm 1 ~ Acts 1:15-17, 21-26
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 20, 2012

Last Sunday we considered the ramifications of sustaining the inconvenient faith calling you to question your preconceived notions about God and Christianity and when necessary abandon them, so you can boldly step out from your comfort zone as God leads you.

We also considered the downside of clinging to a convenient faith that never asks you to do anything risky or important for God or your neighbor. Instead a convenient faith encourages mediocrity, confirms your prejudices and keeps your illusions hermetically sealed off from any truth that could set you free, if you're brave enough to face it.

Jesus came to rescue us from this cheap and easy faith so we can become extraordinary humans being, if only because we've allowed ourselves to be plugged into God, the source of all goodness and life.

You may remember two weeks ago the sermon was based on the passage in John's Gospel quoting Jesus saying, "I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower... Abide in me as I abide in you..." John 15:1; 4)

I hope you remember the word "abide" has multiple diverse meanings that actually complement each other. Abide means to endure without yielding; it also means to patiently wait for something or someone. When you abide in Christ you also conform to Christ. So Jesus invites you to abide in him, so you can patiently wait for him when you're stressed and endure with him when you're tempted. Abiding in Christ means you allow yourself to be transformed or made over, so you can become Christ-like. Finally, abiding means you let Christ live in you so you can live in Christ.

It's when you set your heart on practicing these things that you find yourself abandoning your convenient, stuck-in-the-mud faith and embracing the inconvenient, full speed ahead faith modeled by the prophets and apostles.

Today's sermon is my attempt to help us figure out the best way to "abide" in Christ so we can embrace that inconvenient faith, which is certainly troublesome in the short run, but guarantees Christian character in the long run.

This morning's Psalter reading is from the Book of Psalms which has been often called the Hymnbook of the Bible. Today the psalms are seen as a collection of poetry running the whole gamut of human emotions. Originally the psalms were meant to be sung in worship. Sadly, the original tunes didn't survive except for the occasional

musical instruction “selah,” notated in some of the psalms which are directions to the choirmaster to sing faster or slower, louder or softer or maybe even to pause.

It would be nice to know the original tunes, but we really have all we need in the lyrics, those words expressing the psalmists’ deepest despairs and highest hopes as they abided in God and wrestled with their faith.

I have no idea who decided the order of the psalms, but it seems Psalm 1 is intentionally placed first because it presents the fundamental choice between the happiness of the righteous and the distress of the wicked that ultimately determines the quality and direction of our lives.

*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 his law they meditate
day and night.*

Right away the psalmist draws the stark contrast between those who seek and those who reject God.

*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.*

At first glance it appears the psalmist is looking at the world through rose colored glasses, guaranteeing the righteous will reap instant happiness as long as they don’t follow the way of wicked. But maybe a better word for “happy” would be “blessed.”

*“Blessed are those (whose) delight is in
The law of the Lord...”*

The Hebrew word for “blessed” actually means “to walk straight forward” or “to proceed and advance.” So in context, the psalmist is saying, “Happy (or Blessed) are those who walk the straight path and advance in their understanding that leads to wisdom.” Doesn’t that make sense? There will be times when you’re far from happy

especially when everything's going against you, but if you abide or endure and walk the straight path leading to advanced understanding and wisdom you'll end up being delighted for your time spent meditating on the Law of the Lord.

Now when I say "delighting in" the Law you might be wondering why then did Jesus fault the Pharisees for spending so much time fixated on the Law? And why does the psalmist encourage daily meditation on the Law Jesus seemed to deprecate?

Remember what Jesus said, "I did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it." Jesus had no quarrel with the Law of Moses, but he did part ways with those who choked the life out of it by making the law a burden.

What was the original intent of the Law, set down in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy? That question was unintentionally asked by the scribe who asked Jesus, "Rabbi, what is the greatest commandment?" Jesus answered him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul... mind...and strength. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it, Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these commandments." (Matthew 36-40)

Look at the Ten Commandments. At first it looks like a severe list of "thou shalt nots" but when you look closer you begin to see the first four commandments set helpful guidelines for building and maintaining a healthy friendship with God and the last six set helpful guidelines for building and maintaining friendships with each other. You see, the Commandments and the Law of Moses are codes of ethical behavior given so the Israelites could live harmoniously with God and one another.

Now listen again to the psalmist's bold declaration:

*Happy (or blessed) are those whose delight
is in the Law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate
day and night.*

So the psalmist, and later Jesus, saw the law as more than bothersome restraints on our behavior or a constant reminder of your failure to keep the law because you consistently break it, instead God's law ultimately shows you how to properly respond to God's love by seriously nurturing your relationships with God and each other every day, night and day.

So Psalm 1 is really a celebrative hymn expressing the delight of those who've discovered the formula for faithful living in the beloved community. But before we become too celebrative let's be careful not to get too smug and self-righteous because we're the "chosen ones" and everybody else is at best, less enlightened or, at worst, hell bound. Believing that would mean all your meditating was a waste of time. You might even say you over meditated yourself.

Let's face it, even if we meditate day and night we still teeter on the line between good and evil. Isn't that why we pray

*"forgive us our debts...
and lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil."*

If we're blessed or happy and able to delight in the law of the Lord, it's not because we meditated ourselves into goodness, but only because God invited us into his goodness. This is where Pharisees and sometimes Presbyterians (remember both begin with a "P") got it all wrong. Even if we know the gospel of forgiveness and salvation, we still have this stubborn belief that we have to prove ourselves worthy; we can't accept, deep down, that we are righteous (or right with God) only because God makes it so.

That's why the psalmist pointed out,
*(The righteous) are like trees
planted by streams of water
which yield their fruit in its
season,
and their leaves do not wither.* (Psalm 1:3)

"They are like trees, planted by streams of water."

Question: Did the trees plant themselves by streams of water? No, they were planted by someone who knew the best place to plant them. In the Middle East streams of running water are few and far between. Only someone with foresight and intelligence would know the best place for a tree to be planted, where it would be guaranteed to take root and grow. Only then would its leaves never wither and always bear fruit.

This past week I found myself having almost the same conversation with two entirely different people, a young man and an older man who both felt they weren't good enough to call themselves Christian. The odd thing about it is both of them take Jesus seriously. Each one expressed in one breath his love for Jesus, but in the next his unworthiness. My own estimation of both of them is they're better Christians than I am because I see Christ in each of them in ways I don't see in myself.

So what can I say to these serious Christians whose earnest desire is intentional Christian living through discipleship?

Maybe I can say to them what Jesus said to the honest scribe, who agreed with Jesus that loving God and your neighbor was the most important expression of faith. What did Jesus say back to him? "You're not far from the Kingdom of God."

You're not far from the Kingdom of God whenever you acknowledge your worst attempts to please yourself despite your best attempts to please God. Thankfully God is more forgiving and understanding than we are. That's why the Apostle Paul could boldly proclaim, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

So, after saying all these things what's the bottom line, what can you take home and cogitate over until next Sunday?

Maybe this: despite our failures and shortcomings and everything else, even so, God has planted us by streams of water so we can bear fruit that will feed and edify by us edified by us if only because that's how God set it up in the first place.

This is some of the stuff of the inconvenient, but life giving faith modeled by the prophets and apostles who despite their many failings, stood tall and firm as God allowed them to preach the gospel and speak the truth not just by what they said, but especially by how they lived.

May we take up the same challenge and go and do likewise.

Amen.