

comes together in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ alone embodies that law, and Christ alone interprets that law. Following any other standard than Christ himself, *according* to Christ, puts us on the same footing as the scribes and Pharisees—people who mistakenly thought the “law” was Torah or scripture—people who lost sight of the fact that God’s law is *love*, above all else.

It is, perhaps, especially appropriate that we reflect on this whole idea of “law” today—Palm Sunday—because of the misuse and misunderstanding of this law that was going on behind the scenes at this time. I find it so very ironic that at the exact same time that the “law,” in the person of Jesus, arrived in Jerusalem, riding on a donkey, that the scribes and Pharisees were meeting behind closed doors, plotting to do away with the very “law” they thought they were upholding.

They didn’t understand, did they, that the “law” wasn’t the Torah. They didn’t understand that the “law” wasn’t scripture.

They didn’t understand that God’s law was, instead, the law of *love*, and that the Word of this law—the Word of Love—had been made flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, so that all who knew him would know God’s love and feel God’s love and know of God’s love forever and ever.

Bonhoeffer understood this, of course. He understood that Jesus was God’s law of love, and he lived that law—that law of love—in all that he did. He followed that law—he followed *Christ*—even when it led to his arrest. He followed that law—he followed *Christ*—the entire time he was imprisoned in a concentration camp for living that love. And, ultimately, he was obedient to that law unto death.

Palm Sunday, I think, gives us a unique opportunity to think about what we might have done if we’d been there in Jerusalem with Jesus some two thousand or so years ago. Would we have been throwing palm branches down before Jesus’ donkey as he rode into town?

Or would we have huddled with the scribes and Pharisees, plotting his downfall?

Where are we *today*?

Where are *you* today?

Amen.

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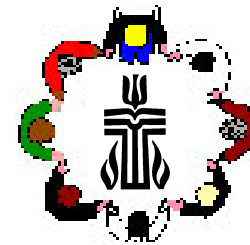
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“*The Law of Love*”
Sermon by
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Palm Sunday
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Matthew 5:17-20

“Reaching Up to God ...
Reaching Out to Others.”

Matthew 5:17-20

These past few weeks, as you know if you've been with us here on Sunday mornings, we've immersed ourselves in the theology of German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer—a journey that's been a little challenging at times, to say the least. But at the same time, we've learned a lot along the way.

For example, we've learned:

- That obedience to Christ is the key to being a Christian;
- That Jesus' Sermon on the Mount tells us what we have to do to be obedient;
- That "cheap grace" happens when we accept God's gift of grace ... but then refuse to reciprocate with our obedience to Christ; and
- That obedience sometimes involves suffering ... but that's okay, because suffering done in obedience to Christ is redemptive in that it brings us closer to Christ.

We've explored the ethical considerations associated with obedience, because we've also learned that it's hard, sometimes, to know *how* to be obedient—that it can be *hard* to discern the will of God, because the will of God could very well *change*, according to the unique circumstances in any given situation.

And so, we've discovered that the will of God is found in selfless acts of service to others, in the name of Jesus Christ, and that *love* is the underlying principle that guides these acts of service—that as long as what we do is done out of love, that God will work in us and through us to enact God's will for us here on earth (and beyond).

In fact, as I look back over our theological

journey these past few weeks, it seems almost as though we've been peeling back the layers of an onion—the onion of "obedience"—one layer at a time, where the first layer is grace, the second layer is suffering, the third layer is love ...

And the fourth layer is today's layer, which is this: Law.

"Law," of course, is a logical layer to explore in terms of obedience, because law, after all, sets forth the standards of behavior to which God holds us accountable. God's law is tough, though, and not just because the standard itself is so high—God's law is tough because it's hard, sometimes, for us to even know fine what "law" is.

Take today's passage in Matthew, for example—a passage described in one commentary I read as "the most difficult passage to be found anywhere" in the Gospel of Matthew. It's a short passage—just four verses—but those four verses have a *lot* of information in them about God's law—what it is, what it *isn't*, and what God expects of us in terms of us abiding by it.

So I thought it might be good for us to take a few moments this morning and take a closer look at those four verses, so that we can better understand this whole concept of God's law.

So the first question we want to answer is this: What exactly *is* the law that Jesus defines in these four verses?

You'd think this would be a relatively easy question to answer, but it really isn't, because back in Jesus' time, "law" could mean any of a number of things. For example, "law" could be the Torah—the first five books of the Old Testament, or Hebrew bible. So a short

answer to the question of "what is law" might be just that—that law is the Torah.

However, "law" could also be defined a little more broadly. More specifically, "law" could also be defined as *scripture*, which would include not only the Torah, but also the writings of the prophets. This actually seems to be how Jesus is defining "law" in the passage, since he refers to both "law" and "prophets" together in verse 17.

However, Jesus really doesn't seem to be using either the Torah *or* scripture to define "law." Jesus, instead, seems to point *beyond* this idea that Torah or scripture is law. Because Jesus is claiming, in some way, to "fulfill" that law.

What does that mean, do you suppose? How can "law" be *fulfilled*? After all, isn't "law" just words? How can *words* be fulfilled?

When we think of the word, "fulfill," we generally think of it in terms of action—to "fulfill" an obligation, for example, means to accomplish it, or complete it, or bring it to some kind of finish. "Fulfilling scripture," then, means that Jesus has brought these words—these words of scripture—to completion. Jesus has become the Word incarnate. The Word, quite literally, has become flesh.

What this means, practically speaking, is that Jesus is, in a very real way, defining *himself* as the "law." He is not only the *interpreter* of the law, but in a very real sense he is *the actual law itself*. Jesus is a living example of what "law" looks like, because Jesus embodies that law in a very real way. Jesus *enacts* God's law simply by living.

So, what this means is if we want to understand "law" as set forth anywhere in the bible, all we need to do is to look at Jesus. Because in Jesus

there's no such thing as "Old Testament" law and "New Testament" law—there's only *one* law—God's law—made manifest in Christ as love. All of scripture, "old" and "new," points to and testifies to Jesus Christ as being *the* law of God—the *will* of God—revealed.

So, what *this* means is if we want to be obedient to God's law, then we need to be obedient to Christ, because *Christ is God's law*. To follow the law, we have to follow Jesus. Or, as Bonhoeffer would say, we need to be *conformed* to the image of Christ, to *reflect* the image of Christ in all that we are and all that we do.

Bonhoeffer would, of course, point out that *we* don't do the conforming here, because there's nothing *we* can do to reshape and mold ourselves into the image of Christ, because conforming us to the image of Christ is *God's* work. It comes to us through the gift of grace. But he would also remind us that to avoid "cheap grace"—grace that we take for granted, grace that takes and gives nothing in return—to avoid "cheap grace," we are required to do our very best to listen for the will of God, and then to *do* it, as we understand it, at all times.

This is why, for Bonhoeffer, there is no such thing as a "one size fits all" kind of Christian response to any given situation. It's because God's law—God's *love*—as embodied in the person of Jesus Christ, can and *does* vary according to all of the different factors that come into play. For Bonhoeffer, grace is a gift to which we are called to respond every single minute of every single day with our loving obedience to Christ. We are called to look for—and to *find*—this love of Christ in all that we are and all that we do.

So it's all related—the obedience, and the grace, and the love, and the law—and it all