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Isaiah 58:1-9a, Matthew 5:13-20
Light and Law

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My sermon this morning is about light and law, these two. They are connected. We can hardly lend much light to this world if we do not seek to live a holy life here. And a holy life, in turn, requires that we cherish and obey the will of our Maker for us.

So, here are my two Gospel texts. The first one is one we quote at each baptism. When we give the baptismal candle, we do so with these words:

¹⁶Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven. (Matthew 5:16, KJV)

And right after this, in the next verse, our Lord turns to speak of the law:

¹⁷Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. (Matthew 5:17, KJV)

Let me speak of the law first, and then of the light. I fear that this first part of the sermon is a bit perplexing. You would think that knowing the path we should walk that we might live a life pleasing to our Maker would be a good thing. You would think we would be glad to know God's law for us and glad to walk in that law as best we can. But there are good people, including church leaders, who are uneasy with God's law. It is the times. These are times that seem not to cherish the holy law of God, at least in some denominations.

Then, I want to turn to the happier part of the sermon: You have light in you! Do not be discouraged that you have little to give to this world. Why, you have light in a world that really needs some light.

So, first, the law. Jesus says this:

¹⁷Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. (Matthew 5:17, KJV)

Who? Who suspected Jesus of destroying the law? Strangely, tragically, it is often good-intentioned people who say that Jesus has destroyed the law. They own Jesus as being their own true Lord and Saviour, only they say "Not so" to him in this matter of God's law. In this, they are like Peter himself, the very rock on which the Church is built. For when that man heard Jesus speak of the cross, he dared to contradict his Lord:

²²Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee. (Matthew 16:22, KJV)

Well, it's no good. In the end, it does not work to say "Nay!" to the Lord. And so immediately we read that Jesus answers Peter rebuke with his own rebuke:

²³But he turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men. (Matthew 16:23, KJV)

Likewise, I can think of three well-intentioned groups of people who affirm what Jesus denies! They teach that Jesus came to abolish the law. Jesus has his opponents, both ancient and modern. Let me take them in turn.

First, we have the scribes and the Pharisees of old. I have much admiration for these folks, and in a way, we can think of them as defenders of the piety of ordinary faithful people. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus intensifies the law. He makes the law even more noble. We will see illustrations of that in next Sunday's Gospel Lesson. For example, Jesus will preach this:

²¹Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: ²²But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire. (Matthew 5:21-22, KJV)

But now, in our reading, before Jesus even gets to this intensification of the law, he anticipates the objection of the Pharisees that he is abolishing the law. Isn't it enough, I imagine them saying, for the blacksmith, for example, to make good horseshoes and to avoid murder? Is it really necessary to set aside the law against murder and to emphasize the even higher standard against anger?

To this objection, Jesus answers that he is not "abolishing" the law, but "fulfilling." He is not abolishing the law against murder; rather he is urging the blacksmith on toward purity of heart so that he seeks to free himself bit by bit even from anger.

The second group of good-hearted people who oppose Jesus in his preaching of the law are folks from the medieval world who taught what are called the "counsels of perfection." It seems to me that they were like the first group in their sympathy for the ordinary working man or woman. They taught that the high preaching of Jesus was suited to the monks and the priests, and that the ordinary lay Christian did not have to strive for such high principles. I think we can be proud of Martin Luther for vigorously opposing this preaching of the counsels of perfection. Luther wanted no such elitism among God's people. Luther wanted all

of the baptized, both law and ordained, to seek obedience to our Lord's preaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

And the third group who say no to Jesus in his preaching of the law are the Corinthians, both old and new. This group affirms what Jesus explicitly denies. He says that he did not come to abolish the law, to which the Corinthians and modern antinomians reply, "Oh yes you did. You did come to abolish the law!"

Over the years, I have written a lot about the Corinthian antinomians. In fact I wrote about them in an earlier draft of this sermon, but I have decided to leave much of it out, for now. I think I might need a different kind of setting, maybe a series of Monday evening or Coffee Hour classes. Here, let me try to go to the heart of the matter: Christian opposition to the holy law of God is a strange, but definite phenomenon. There is something about the particular Corinthian notion of "the Gospel" that led them to proudly practice a lax morality. It was as if the Corinthians believed that they knew *a better way*, regardless of settled moral teaching. St. Paul was astonished and grieved by this.

Meanwhile, let me make this personal by saying this: If I should start preaching what Jesus himself denies, that is, if I should start preaching a certain notion of the Gospel according to which I say that Jesus came to abolish the holy law of God for his disciples, and that "the whole glory of the Gospel is that we are freed from God's law," and if I should start saying that God's holy law as interpreted in the traditional moral teaching of the Church does not apply to Christians, then take me by the hand and lead me away from the pulpit and kindly explain to me that I must have drifted into senility and that it is time for me to go.

Or better, as St. Paul put it:

⁸But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be accursed.
(Galatians 1:8, RSV)

Imagine that angel. Let him be beautiful. Let her be gentle and kind-hearted. Let that angel be officially endowed with every kind of credential, both academic and ecclesiastical. The problem is that this angel preaches a different gospel. St. Paul says, then, let that angel be accursed. In fact, if he himself begins to preach a different gospel, then let him be cursed. Certainly St. Paul does not want to be accursed. No one should want such a fate. So, all things considered, it is not a good idea to forsake the traditional teaching of the Gospel.

Well, enough of that for now. It seems obvious to me that Jesus taught the law of God. Indeed, he is the One from whom the law comes. If there is a holy law of God at all, if our Maker has convictions about how he wants us to live, the law comes from his hand, for he is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Anyway, how else are we going to read the Sermon on the Mount except as our Lord teaching us about life, both its hope and its conduct?

So, let's move on to a second theme in this morning's Gospel. Jesus speaks of light and candles. He says this:

¹⁴You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.
¹⁵No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.(Matthew 5:14-16, NRSV)

Nowadays I am reading Ken Follett's big novel, *World without End*. It has the same kind of charm for me that his earlier novel, *Pillars of the Earth*, had: that is, he has the ability to transport me back into another world, in this case, the world of medieval England. A fun thing about these novels is Follett's discussion of medieval architecture, both the grand cathedrals and the humble huts of poor folk. One of his simple observations is that homes in those days had few windows. And if they had windows, they seldom had glass. Glass was reserved for cathedrals and important churches. Ordinary folks did not have much glass. Couldn't afford it. But if they had no glass, the window could leave their homes cold in the winter time, so they did not have many windows.

But without windows, I imagine those homes to be pretty dark. And in such dark places, it would be awfully nice to have some light. It would be awfully nice to have a candle. Light comes from the cooking fire, yes, but it would also be nice to have some light in other portions of the house. And if you have a candle, for goodness sake, do not hide it under a bushel basket.

So it is in this sad world of ours. It would be awfully nice to have some more light. I do not mean photons and candle watts and so on. I mean, the light of holiness of life. I mean a light in this world that comes from him who is the very Light of the World, as St. John says. I mean light that comes from you and from me as we try to live for Christ.

Somewhere out there, there is a fifteen-year-old boy whose life is going shipwreck. Always there is! Drugs, alcohol, run-ins with the law, occasional handcuffs, broken-hearted, confused, and frightened parents standing by, at their wits end wondering what they can do to save their son. Somewhere out there, there is a fifteen-year-old girl whose life and health, reputation and future are at risk. Always there is! If that young man or that young woman were to come to church, perhaps I or some other preacher would say what St. Paul says:

¹⁹Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; ²⁰you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19, RSV)

But the thing is, that fifteen-year child might not be in church. Or even if he is, even if she is, that fifteen-year-old might say, "Well, of course that's what the preacher says! That's what he's supposed to say. That's what he gets paid to say. But what does he know of life?"

But if you are a fifteen-year-old friend to that straying one, you can be light to that one in a way that goes beyond what the preacher can do. It is something about your concrete situation in life. If you care for your body as the very temple of the Holy Spirit within you, if you care more for the applause of heaven than the applause of the world, then even if you do not preach to your friend, your life nonetheless might function as light for that one and help save a life.

Somewhere out there, there is a business person tempted toward fraud or shady practices. Always there is. Somewhere out there, there is a tempted toward unfaithfulness. Always there is. A single sentence from you might well function as light for that one. You might save a soul.

In a dark world, nothing is so beautiful, I believe, as a holy life. I wish mine were more holy. I know something of the path toward that. I need to pray more. I need more integrity between what I believe and how I live. And I bet any of us could say the same thing.

We can do this thing. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches an extraordinary way of life. It caught my heart when I was a boy reading the sermon for the first time, in the old King James Version.

Be pleased to think that you have some wisdom, you have some beauty, you have some high ideals, and you have some light to share in a world that needs some light, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.