

October 23, 2016 Pentecost 23

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

We have a three year old grandson who always pushes the boundaries. His father seems to encourage it for he thinks it builds a creative, flexible mind. I have another opinion. When it's time to come into the house the requirement becomes a game of avoidance and prolongation that I find more than painful to watch.

Now, I have to admit that I have a love / hate relationship with rules and regulations. I did more than my share of breaking them in my youth. But I also know that kids need some clear boundaries to bounce off of. I must admit that sometimes when I'm feeling tired and a little cranky, I just wish other people would settle down and follow the rules. Well, my take on the rules.

Have you noticed this trend in your life?

But then I remember our Christian faith is based on the fact that **Jesus** broke a lot of laws and radically reinterpreted many of the rules and requirements. His shift was from *what everyone knew to be right to what actually helped*. So I'm conflicted.

However, in ancient Israel, in the time of the Psalmists and before the Prophets, the Law of Moses was seen as a life-giving gift. It gave the people stability. It created boundaries, identities and practices that brought order out of the chaos of blood vengeance and tribal feuding. "*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*" protected one from the spiral of violence in a revenge dominated world.

The law regulated family relationships and community responsibilities. Care for the widow and the orphan was a life giving provision. It was the social safety net of the time. The psalmists sing for joy about the benefits and beauty of the law. They re-sight the fine balance of rights and responsibilities.

Now we find ourselves living in troubling time like the prophets. Just a look south of the border at the presidential race says it all. Where is the balance of rights

and responsibility? Where is the respect for difference and the value of all human life? Where is the helpful agenda?

In our changing times, the laws we live with around good order, privacy, personal responsibility and the common good are becoming disconnected from basic human rights. Something like this is also going on in Jeremiah's day. Jeremiah sees the need for the Law of Moses to be transformed so that it can find its way into the people's hearts.

Let me be clear here, the law to be written on our hearts is more than the one connected to the courts. It is the law of compassionate living, the family code of the household of **God**.

This law begins to find a place in our heart as we wake up to the fact that our society's sanctions are not up to the task of living in **God's New Day**, and we must raise the bar of inclusion, protection and assistance ourselves. If our surroundings are becoming unjust we must become more just.

This law finds a larger place in our hearts as we let the energy drain out of what separates us and attach ourselves with new energy to helpful solutions.

It becomes well established as we open our eyes and become aware of, and grateful for, the gift of life and the opportunities to live life together at a higher more compassionate level.

The law is written on our hearts as we open our lives to one another and choose to live in a state of grace, a state of gratefulness, a state of accepting more responsibilities in our relationships.

In short, we become attached to what this higher law respects, which is this:

***The dignity of human life and the ultimate value of each human being.***

***The fact that we need one another and no one is expendable.***

***We all must strive to be on the same side of God's accepting grace.***

When we attach to, when we identify with these values, we shift from *what's right to what helps* and what helps often challenges us to become even more helpful. We discover and participate in a deep respect for all people. We act differently. We dream differently. We love differently. We see differently. We experience **God** differently.

This causes me to experience my grandson and his father differently. (No judgement on my part anymore.)

Friends, what we attach to, take into ourselves and identify with become written on our hearts.

### *Application for Today*

When we shift from *what's right to what helps*, the family code of the household of **God** is written on our hearts. It becomes the deep respect of spiritual living.

Luke 18: 9a, 10-14a

I discovered Louise Penny this summer. How many here have read her books? Wow what an author! I'm not normally a "*Who Done It*" reader so I'm years behind discovering her Inspector Gamache Series of books.

I have now just finished book three "The Cruellest Month." There she introduces the psychological concept of "*the near enemy.*" "*Two emotions that look the same but are actually opposite. The one parades as the other, is mistaken for the other, but one is healthy and the other is sick, twisted.*"

The three basic couplings are

**Attachment** masquerading as **Love**,

**Pity** masquerading as **Compassion** and

**Indifference** masquerading as **Equanimity**.

As her books reflect the **near enemy** often leads to tragic even deadly outcomes.

**Compassion and Pity** are the easiest to understand. Compassion involves empathy. We see a stricken person as an equal. Our modern understanding of pity doesn't. If we pity someone we feel superior. We say or think "poor so-an-so."

And it's hard to tell one from the other, even for the person feeling the emotion. Almost everyone would claim to be full of compassion. It's one of the noble emotions. But all too often, it is pity they feel. So pity is the **near enemy** of compassion. It looks like compassion, acts like compassion, but is actually the opposite of it.

And as long as pity's in place, there's no room for compassion. It destroys, squeezes out, the nobler emotion, because we fool ourselves into believing we're feeling one emotion, when we're actually feeling the other.

Other the years, I've seen pity masquerading as compassion in our churches. It betrays itself in moments of religious self-righteous indignation. We fool ourselves, but not always others. The decline of churchianity is a testament to this **near enemy** in the church.

**Love and Attachment** are a bit harder to discern.

Mothers and children are classic examples. Some mothers see their job as preparing their children to live in the big world: To be independent; to get an education, to marry and have children of their own. To live wherever they choose and do what makes them happy. That's love.

Others, and we all see them, cling to their children, do too much for their children, live through their children, manipulate, use guilt trips....

But it's not just mothers and children. It occurs in friendships, marriages, any intimate relationship. Love wants the best for others. Attachment takes hostages.

Sometimes the church is taken hostage by its attachment to dogma, or self-importance and we end up acting out the **near enemy** judging instead of loving.

**Equanimity and Indifference** may be considered the worst of the **near enemies** and the most corrosive. Equanimity is balance. When something overwhelming happens in our lives we feel it strongly but we also have an ability to overcome it. It's difficult but deep down inside we find a stable core. That's called equanimity: An ability to accept things and move on.

We know those stoic people: Stiff upper lip. Calm in the face of tragedy. And some really are that brave.

But some, aren't, they just don't feel pain because they don't care about others, only about themselves. They don't feel like the rest of us but hide it. The problem is telling one from another.

The problem in the church is when faced with challenging times or situations we aren't brave enough to feel with our heart and soul and so fail to move from *what's right to what helps*.

People with equanimity are unbelievably brave, cool, calm and collected. We revere it. But who's brave, and who's the heartless **near enemy**?

I would like to add a religious coupling to these three, **Observant** and **Self-righteous**.

**Jesus** tells a story or I should say a cautionary tale about the need for the family code of the household of **God** to be written on our hearts to avoid the *near enemy* infiltrating our relationship with **God**.

In the story two men go up to pray. One is religiously observant the other is not. The religiously observant one catalogues his compliance with the rules while the other just throws himself upon **God's** mercy. The law is written on the first man's observances but not on his heart for he fails to respect, value or care about anyone else. His secret self-congratulation at the expense of others is exposed in his prayer. The reverse is true of the second man.

Look what happens when **God's** law, when the family code of the household of **God** is NOT written on our hearts. Even the apparent good we do is no good at all. No good because, it's twisted. It's the **near enemy** at work.

And yet, whenever **compassion, love** and **equanimity** fill out our religious **observance**, **God's** law finds its way into our hearts. Grace abounds and good outcomes are always possible.

### *The Application for Today*

**When we shift from  
what's right to what helps.  
When our religious observance includes  
compassion, love and equanimity,  
God's law is written on our hearts  
and becomes the joy, and deep respect  
of spiritual living.**