



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON

3-4-12

Once an Eskimo hunter went to see the local missionary who had been preaching in the village.

“I want to ask you something,” the hunter said.

“What’s that?” the missionary replied.

“If I did not know about God and sin,” the hunter said, “would I go to hell?”

“No,” the missionary said, “not if you did not know.”

“Then why”, asks the hunter, “Why did you tell me?”

Why did you tell me? Why indeed? That question is one of the conundrums that keeps us all scratching our heads as we try to figure out sin and salvation, heaven and hell, law and faith.

The story ties in closely to the statement in Romans, “For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law; neither is there violation.” Do we really think that is possible – where there is no law, neither is there violation? I’ve been raised being told that “ignorance of the law is no excuse.”

Consider the situation of our first human beings – Adam and Eve. If God never told them about the fruit on the Tree of Good and Evil and they came upon that fruit and ate it – would they have sinned – or would there be no violation? Something to think about. They would, I suppose, still have received the knowledge of good and evil – they would have had their eyes opened, so to speak, and there would have been no going back to their original innocence. And because of that bite of the fruit, their relationship with God was changed forever, although technically they would not have broken any law. But we know in the story God did tell them not to eat of it, and when they did, they definitely violated the relationship God had asked of them

That relationship between law and faith, law and relationship, law and our actions, is a tough one for us to sort out. Paul, writing in Romans, is stressing that faith is beyond or more than following law. He is emphasizing righteousness – or right living – right living being the relationship Abraham had with God -that relationship that relied on faith, and trust, and grace and patience.

For I can tell you a story about adhering to the law and violating relationship, or righteousness. When the children were very young I was hired to help part-time as a classroom aid – a para. I was to be in the classroom of a couple of middle-school teachers who had very large numbers of students in the class. One class was a home economics class taught by a young, first year teacher. When I first came into the classroom it was at once evident that the class overwhelmed her and she was extremely uncertain of her skill and ability to teach. She offered no way that I

could assist her. Instead, she seemed to not want me in the room at all. So, picking up on her attitude, I went to a back of the room in a corner, folded my arms, and watched. Each day that went on. I would observe and inwardly critique and criticize her actions. Now I was following the “letter of the law.” I was showing up for my assignments and doing just what the teacher asked of me – nothing. But over time I became ashamed of my bad attitude. I really disliked being there each day and feeling so mean inside. And I truly think that it was during Lent that I repented of my sin of broken relationship. I realized that my attitude destroyed any chance of relationship with this teacher. I felt sorry for her and remorseful about our wasted time together. And I swear to you, it’s the reason I remember and still tell this story – when I entered the classroom the next Monday, I went to my corner and stood with my arms crossed, but my heart and mind were in a different place. I stood there without condemnation in my heart. And within perhaps 2-3 days, she responded to me. Shyly she asked me to help with something, and then something else, and we ended the year working together as co-workers. It remains in my mind as a miracle of the healing of sin in my own heart.

To me – whether you know the law or don’t know the law, whether you follow the law to the T or not – the ruin, the violation of relationship is what breaks us from God and from each other. You see, no matter what words we use to describe how to live with God and with each other, we all know deep within ourselves the experiences of community and of alienation, of connection and disconnection to the divine. This is the righteousness of faith – and all of us fall short of it at different times. We really are free to make decisions and our choices really do have consequences. And when those consequences are separation from God or from God’s creation, then we miss the mark, we sin, we wander far in a land that is waste.

Look how that works out with Jesus and his disciples. When Peter decides that things should go the way that Peter thinks is best, when Peter wants to control Jesus and His decisions, then Jesus rebukes him, placing Peter in league with Satan. When others decide to pursue material pleasures and possessions rather than follow Jesus, they lose out on the relationship. And when their attitudes involve being ashamed of a life of faith and a life including Jesus, then they lose out for all time on the possibility of having a life that is filled with true living.

So, whether the Eskimo knew the law or not, he would know when he was treating others well, and when he was treating the creation well, and when he was choosing the Good. And whether I was adhering to the Law or not, I knew when my actions were harming relationship with others. I knew that the lack of grace in my heart had separated me from another. However we get into it, when we run into a wrecked relationship: with God, with one another, or with the whole of creation, we realize that we sin, that we are sinners. For sin is not the violation of laws but the violation of relationships and the choice to remain in those wrecked relationships.

But thank God there is repentance and penance and forgiveness and absolution. Thank God that until the Day of Judgment there are opportunities for recovering the fullness of life. Thank God there is a season called Lent that encourages us to examine our relationships and to accept some responsibility for the way things are. And thank God that this is only the second week in Lent and there is opportunity to learn more about repentance and return, about righteousness and hope, about grace and love.

Thanks be to God.