



**“The Spirit of God’s Law”
Psalm 1 and Mark 2:23-28
Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, June 2, 2024**

Across the land, high school and college graduates are launching their caps skyward! For years, the students have been reading, analyzing, discovering, and creating – not to mention whining, dreading, and cursing! Yet, in the end, *passing* all of the requirements to earn their degrees.

To underscore the significance of their achievement, schools hold graduation ceremonies. The subtext of these ceremonies is: Congratulations! Well done! You did it! We salute you!

However, before they make their momentous march across the stage and clutch their coveted diploma, the ceremony includes a commencement speech. This year, like many years, there were controversies. The President delivered the address at Morehouse College and as he began, one student unfurled a Palestinian flag and several turned their chairs around in silent protest. But the most controversy was kicked up by a kicker – the Kansas City Chief’s kicker Harrison Butker who called Pride month a sin and suggested that women will find more fulfillment in being a homemaker than pursuing a career. Even the nuns grumbled.

However, most commencement speeches were focused more on inspiration than controversy. In addition, to celebrating the milestone with a few clichés, speakers prompted students to ponder what will lead to a rich and meaningful life. Rainn Wilson, best known for his part as an actor in the sitcom, *The Office*, offered graduates five points that sounded like solid points for a sermon – gather a bouquet of virtues, be other-centered, cultivate relationships, devote yourself to love, and keep hope alive. Can I get an “Amen!”?

Thasunda Brown Duckett, the CEO of TIAA, used a catchy metaphor to encourage students to remember that there is a wide spectrum of possibilities ahead of them. She said, “Think back to something you learned in driver’s education: Don’t dwell too long on the rearview mirror. Use it to take a quick glance backward to ensure you can get to your destination safely. But [remember that] the windshield is a lot wider than the rearview mirror.”

Of the various commencement speeches I read, the one I found most thought-provoking was delivered by filmmaker and historian Ken Burns at Brandeis. He talked about the dangerous divisions in our country. He said, "It's clear as individuals and as a nation we are dialectically preoccupied. Everything is either right or wrong, red state or blue state, young or old, gay or straight, rich or poor, Palestinian or Israeli, my way or the highway. Everywhere we are trapped by these old, tired, binary reactions, assumptions, and certainties...That preoccupation is imprisoning...we forget the inconvenient complexities of history and of human nature. That, for example, three great religions, their believers, all children of Abraham, each professing at the heart of their teaching, a respect for all human life, each with a central connection to and legitimate claim to the same holy ground, violate their own dictates of conduct and make this perpetually contested land a shameful graveyard. God does not distinguish between the dead. Could you?"

Burns warned of the danger of "us" versus "them" thinking. He said that one of the things he has learned over the years is that there's only "us." There is no "them."

He also had these gems: Listen. Be curious...Remember that none of us get out of here alive...Grief is part of life, and if you explore its painful precincts, it will make you stronger. Do good things, help others. Leadership is humility and generosity squared...Don't confuse success with excellence...(and) make babies (because) one of the greatest things that will happen to you is that you will have to worry about someone other than yourself."

The first of today's scripture readings is Psalm 1. Although a mere six verses, it is a nifty introduction to the Book of Psalms and has the character of a commencement speech. It advises what will bring happiness and fulfillment while warning what will bring misery and emptiness. Psalm 1 is simple and straightforward. If the ancient Hebrews had commencement ceremonies, this psalm would have been plastered across the back page of the program.

The psalmist offers this sage advice: Those who hoist the glass and declare, "Life is good!" are those who follow God's law. Those who reject God's law wither and die. Any questions?

Psalm 1 draws a sharp distinction between the path that leads to life and the path that leads to death. And while we can affirm this underlying truth, it does not sit well with us. It prompts us to take issue with it because it is too simplistic. Life is messy and unpredictable. No simple formula holds up in every situation. And, in fact, that is precisely what we discover in some of the psalms that follow. They challenge this too tidy view of life.

And yet, while other psalms argue with the simplicity of Psalm 1, they also affirm its basic premise. Human beings have the freedom to choose how we will live. Although there are a number of factors beyond our control that influence the direction of our lives, we still face daily choices regarding the path we will take. We can follow God's law or we can reject it. Which will it be?

The psalmist is right that following God's law can enrich your life. Being in harmony with God spurs serenity in your soul. However, making the right choice can be tricky.

If you walk out of here with nothing else, walk away with this: It is possible to adhere to all of the 613 laws found in the first five books of the Bible and still get it wrong. It is possible to embrace God's law and still miss the abundant life God intends for us to live.

How? By taking a wooden approach to the law. By obeying each law literally, but remaining blind to context or extenuating circumstances. Such a rigid view of the law is inflexible, uncompromising and unforgiving.

If you have read the novel or seen the musical *Les Misérables*, this is the unwavering approach to the law by the police inspector. He is obsessed with putting Jean Valjean back behind bars despite the fact that after serving 19 years in prison, Valjean has become an honest man making a positive contribution to society. The inspector's merciless obsession with upholding the letter of the law turns him into a callous individual devoid of humanity. He realizes, too late, that strict adherence to the letter of the law while ignoring the spirit of the law, can lead to injustice and cruelty.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus revealed the error in a legalistic approach to the law. His disciples plucked grain on the Sabbath because they were hungry. The Pharisees go berserk. Like the police inspector in *Les Mis*, they viewed upholding the law as an end in itself. They branded Jesus a law breaker because his disciples broke the commandment that forbids work on the Sabbath. Jesus exposed the hole in their strict interpretation of the law by asking if humans were created for the law or if the law were created to enhance the life of humans.

Understood correctly, the psalmist knows that God's law is the path to a bountiful life. He says that those who immerse themselves in God's law "are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither." In the parched land of the psalmist, there are wide stretches of barren land because there is too little moisture for grass or plants, much less trees, to survive. However, you can often spot streams from a distance, because you can see a line of trees. Next to a stream, trees can sink their roots down into the ground and gain the needed water to produce fruit. This is the image the psalmist employs to describe those who are rooted in God's law. However, the psalmist says, not so the wicked. They "are like chaff that the wind blows away." Or, as the Message translation says, the wicked "are mere windblown dust." The vivid contrast between the deeply rooted trees and windblown dust illustrates the dramatic difference between the lives of those who follow God and those who do not. Those who live according to God's law understand the law not as onerous obligations, but as guideposts to a rewarding life.

In Clyde Edgerton's novel, *Walking Across Egypt*, he tells of a grandmother who read the parable of the sheep and the goats that talks about caring for the least of these. She concluded that if Jesus was focused on the least of these, then she should too. So, she befriended Wesley, a teenager with a record. She met him at the juvenile rehabilitation center and they began an unusual friendship.

One Sunday at lunch, the grandmother's adult son said, "Mother, I need to ask you something."

She replied, "Go ahead."

He asked, "Have you been feeling all right?"

“Fine, but I feel badly about that boy having to go back to the rehabilitation center. I feel sorry for him.”

The son says, “Well, that boy doesn’t feel sorry for you.”

The mother says, “How do you know?”

“Well, because he’s a thief, a criminal, a juvenile delinquent. That’s the best place for him.”

“Son, he’s never had a chance to hear the Gospel.”

“He has as good a chance as anybody else. They probably have Gideon Bibles all over the rehabilitation center.”

“Son, nobody ever loved him.”

“If they did, he probably stole their car.”

“Son, the Gospel of Matthew says...

“Mother, I know what Matthew says.”

“No, you don’t. Not in a long time.”

“Yes, I do. I’ve listened to what Matthew says for 23 years.”

“Well, here’s what I know. *Whatever you do to one of the least of these, you do to me.*” Wesley is certainly one of the least of these.”

“Mother, you have already done for him. You have already done, I don’t know what. Doesn’t the Bible say when to stop?”

And she said, “Not that I know of.”¹

The *letter* of the law is three strikes and you’re out. The *spirit* of the law focuses on fairness and compassion and whatever magnifies life.

NOTES

1. Clyde Edgerton, *Walking Across Egypt*, (Ballantine Books, 1987), pp. 175-177.

Prayers of the People ~ Sue Linderman

Let us go to God in prayer

Mighty God

Who surrounds us with your love

Enfolds us in your care

Be with us this day as we pause our daily lives to come to you in worship and thanksgiving

Comfort us, refresh us, grant us courage and wisdom for the days ahead

God of grace

We pray for all who struggle with life's challenges

Whether health concerns, economic needs, relationship challenges, anguish over the future.

As we encounter people day to day, we may never realize the burdens they carry.

Grant us kindness and compassion to all we meet

Recognizing that ours may be the word of support that carries your message of hope to them.

God of our lives

You who knew us before you formed us and call us by name

Who knows every crevice of our being, every desire, every regret, every hope

Speak to us this day of your hope for our lives,

The ways you call us to be the hands and feet of your beloved son in our world

To bring your kingdom into being here on earth, despite all odds, all opposition

One step at a time, one day at a time.

When we tire, give us strength

When we despair, grant us hope

When we struggle, assure us that you walk with us each step of the way

When we reach a goal, show us that you celebrate with us

And charge us to move forward, to do yet more.

When we think our challenges are too hard, too impossible

Remind us of those who have gone before us

Achieving remarkable ends

Overcoming dire circumstances

Searching for justice and making it real

Seeking peace and bringing it to fruition, if only for one person, one circumstance, at a time

For we know that you, our God of possibilities,

Seek to energize us, empower us, equip us to be the people you pray we will become.

And we offer you our heartfelt gratitude as we come to know who we are, whose we are.

As always, we ask this and all our prayers in the name of your son, our risen Lord, who gave us words to pray. **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**