

**Psalm 119:33-40**

119:33 Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end.

119:34 Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.

119:35 Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it.

119:36 Turn my heart to your decrees and not to selfish gain;

119:37 be gracious to me according to your word.

119:38 Confirm to your servant your promise, which is for those who fear you.

119:39 Turn away the disgrace that I dread, for your ordinances are good.

119:40 See, I have longed for your precepts; in your righteousness be gracious to me.

**Matthew 18:15-20**

18:15 "If your brother and sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If you are listened to, you have regained that one.

18:16 But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

18:17 If that person refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a gentile and a tax collector.

18:18 Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

18:19 Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

18:20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

**Sermon: Longing for God's Law:**

Free throws granted for incidental contact at the end of a tied basketball game; a speeding ticket for going 37 in a 35; late fees for being one day past due on a payment.

All these enforcements are by the book, and we can't blame the referee, or the official, or the clerk for doing their job, but these enforcements appear to lack a sense of humanity and grace. To be fair, the consequences of these scenarios are usually minimal for people like you and me. Sure, sports fandom breeds insanity, and high blood pressure at times, but life does eventually go on, even when the refs make boneheaded or righteous calls. And yes, it's annoying to pay late fees and fines, but they rarely have long-lasting effects.

Still, the Joe Friday approach to justice (just the facts, ma'am, and just following the rules, ma'am), has more far-reaching effects as the stakes get higher, or when enforcement is applied to marginalized communities. In many instances, enforcement results in consequences that far outweigh the offense: deportation back to the violence you fled peacefully; eviction, after you worked so hard to find the rent money; longer prison sentences for crimes and substances associated with marginalized communities; disqualification of voting rights because

your maiden name is still on your ID; ostracization from community because of outdated norms; the list goes on. And of course, this is to say nothing of enforcement officials who too often decide that they should also be prosecutor, judge, and jury.

I'm not here this morning to write my account of Les Miserable, or to help Millbrook storm the Bastille, or to unearth more inadequacies and imperfections in our judicial system. Maybe I can do that next week!

This is a segue into this morning's psalm.

I believe we often hear a psalm like today's, one whose author longs to be obedient to God's law, and we bristle at the potential outcome. Rather than see the graceful God of creation, or the nurturing God of Exodus manna, we see the judgmental, wrathful God of the more violent pieces of Hebrew scripture. God's gonna scare us into obedience rather than love us into discipleship. And in such a context, we wield God's law as a weapon of retribution rather than channel it as a path to better understanding our neighbors and better cultivating reconciliation.

Jesus loved God's law. Jesus also fulfilled God's law – that is, Jesus found a way to apply the law with heart, mind, strength, and soul. Jesus practiced the concept of *hedging*.

The commandments were a floor, not a ceiling. Jesus devised practices that addressed conflict head-on, seeking resolution before tension festered into violence. If we look for the humanity in someone, it's a lot harder to resent them, a lot harder to associate their value and their worth based on what they own. If we know someone's heart, it's much harder to resent them for superficial reasons.

It's also worth noting that Jesus lacked confidence in the grace of systems. I'm not saying he denied their legitimacy, I'm simply saying he knew their shortcomings. In today's Matthean lection, Jesus warns his followers to settle disputes in private, to let there be grace and humanity in their decision-making. Often, litigation or prosecution can have grave consequences. Yes, we want justice to be blind and equal, but we also need to find more remedies that prevent us from getting to such a place. Individuals can forgive and atone in ways the courts cannot – We have freedom and flexibility. Jesus reminds his listeners that if they can resolve their conflicts peacefully, they'll gain something greater than retribution: friendship. (Matthew 18:18).

Having noted Jesus' call to peaceful resolution, I am particularly interested in one line of our psalm:

Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;  
Give me life in your ways. (Psalm 119:37)

I wonder, how often are our eyes fixated on vanities, empty prides, and conceits? How often do we make God's law something to be recited or enforced? How often do we view God's law as something that we have a hold on, rather than God's law being something that has a hold on us?

When we choose to wield God's law as a weapon, Nineveh's destruction is just reward for enduring three days in the belly of a big fish; and our thirst for vengeance clouds our judgment so much, we aren't able to offer God gratitude for the breath in our own lungs, or for the shade of serendipitous palm leaves, or for the mercy and hope of preserving life.

When we choose to wield God's law as a weapon, to cloak ourselves in self-proclaimed righteousness, to demand fair payment for our loyalty and service...when we do these things, we eliminate our ability to celebrate the embrace of a parent reconciling with a child; we eliminate our ability to see that domination systems traumatize their foot soldiers, too, rob them of their humanity.

When we wield God's law, the sorrow of laying down our harps can manifest to violence, not just to our enemies, but to their babies as well. When we wield God's law, we rob God's law of its life-giving sustenance.

This psalmist (and I believe you and me as well!) longs for understanding; longs to delight in life-giving, heart-moving, empathetic, servant-centered practices; longs to find God in the traditions and customs first set out at Sinai.

Here's I what I believe: The Lord is slow to anger, and abounds in steadfast love, from generation to generation. (Psalm 145:8). Torah, or the commandments, or the law, or Millbrook just trying to be Millbrook, whatever we want to call it, is our attempt to model the grace and love of God. There are plenty of clauses and ordinances we can explore in further depth in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, but Jesus gives us a central thesis: Love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love neighbor as self. (Luke 10:27).

I believe in this age, and in every age, we put too much faith in our systems to apply God's ordinances, and too little in ourselves. I ask you: do courts, corporations, tax codes, school systems, state houses, and the countless mechanisms of human-making, do these entities have souls, hearts, and minds? Their artificial intelligence is unquestioned,

but can they feel, can they sense, do they live, and breath, and share the same dependence upon God's abundance as you and me? And how often, whether intentionally or not, do such structures wield the law, rather than live into it?

I believe we will never fully understand God's law, abide in God's law, find love in God's law, until we stop using law as a litmus test for righteousness and a winnowing fork for community. We must use God's law, the Gospel of Millbrook we proclaim, as invitation to model God's mercy, love, and justice.

Good friends, may the living of God's law begin this morning, in each of our hearts, in order that we might bear out God's vision of peace, love, and grace for all we encounter. And may it begin right now. Amen.