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The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd
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Proper 9, Year “A”, Track 2: Zechariah 9:9-12; Psalm 145:8-15; Romans 7:15-25a;
Matthew 11:17-19,25-30

Title: Come and Rest Awhile

Our texts this morning finds us focusing on the law. To be clear we are speaking here not of secular law, but rather religious law. We know, of course, that in great measure civil law derives from religious law. With this said, we need to keep in mind that when the Bible speaks of “the law” it is referring to religious prescriptions regarding how we are to think and behave – not for the purpose of avoiding being fined or arrested but for the purpose of resting in our spirits.

By way of the Gospel according to Matthew this morning we find Jesus

lamenting the lack of understanding among those whom he refers to as the ‘wise and the intelligent.’ Here Jesus is referring to the wealthy who are quite comfortable with the status quo. He is also speaking of the religious leaders – especially the Sadducee’s with their obsession for following the letter of the law even if doing so falls mostly on the needy and innocent. As an example, we might recall that when criticized by the church leaders for healing a man on the Sabbath Jesus replied that man was not made for the Sabbath but rather the Sabbath for man. In that moment we are reminded that Jesus never hesitated to override a rule in the name of love.¹

¹ Mark 2:27

Some twenty plus years later Paul picks up on this theme and constructs a theology around the way that Jesus would have us think about and live into the law. And so, let's spend a few minutes thinking about the place of the *law* in our lives for this is the subject of Jesus' concern here in chapter 11 of the Gospel according to Matthew. It is also the subject that the Apostle Paul is addressing in his letter to the Romans this morning. Though both Jesus and Paul are affirming the importance and the validity of the laws of the Old Testament they both are advancing the theology of an even more mature kind of law. Paul calls this 'law' the Law of the Spirit.

Paul says ‘thank God for the law but also thank God for amazing grace.’

Embrace the law and acknowledge our failures but Paul also wants to say that there is another kind of law that, though it resonates with the law that is prescribed on the printed page, it is not the same.

The Law of the Spirit resides not in a law book but in the heart. And so, let’s spend a few minutes this morning thinking about this concept that the Apostle Paul calls the Law of the Spirit.

**We find Jesus this morning saying,
“Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heaven burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you... for**

I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

So, the question would seem to be: Just what burden is Jesus speaking of here? Well, he doesn't say exactly. This being the case, we might be reminded that sometimes to understand Jesus we need to pay attention to his actions as much as to his words.

As we follow Jesus through his ministry and through his travels around Galilee, we often find him in conflict with the religious leaders of his day – the Pharisees and most especially the Sadducees. Jesus doesn't fault these religious leaders because he thinks of

them as bad people. Of course not. But he does see them as misguided teachers and thus we often find him in conflict with these religious leaders. Jesus strongly objected to the Sadducees' obsession with what today we might call religiosity. Jesus objected to their religion of rules and rule keeping. He objected to their practice and teaching that one could be made right with God, could be made righteous, could be made whole, could be "saved" if you will if we could just somehow keep all the rules, all the time regardless of the how, when or where.

And so, the rabbis were kept busy constantly writing and expanding the rule book called the Talmud. And in

this ever-expanding rule book one could find a rule for just about any and every situation. This resulted in a society where one could hardly take a breath, could hardly take a step or say a word for fear that that they might even inadvertently be breaking a rule – that is to say might even inadvertently find themselves as having offended God.

Bottom line: Jesus would say an emphatic ‘No’ to this kind of religion.

Jesus would say a religion, a way of life that so focuses on rules and the fear of even inadvertently breaking the rules, that is to say ‘breaking the law,’ is to miss the forest while closely examining each and every individual tree.

Again, the Apostle Paul is helpful here. Paul was himself a Pharisee. That, in part, means that he was a very learned man. As a Pharisee he too was very much steeped in the law. Knew it from front to back; cover to cover. Ah, but now he has also encountered Jesus of Nazareth, and his theology is expanding by leaps and bounds.

And so what does Paul have to say?

Well, he begins by acknowledging the human condition – that is to say the reality of sin. “Oh, wretched man that I am,” he says.

I think that though having lived centuries apart, Paul would have felt at home with Martin Luther and Luther

with him. Luther is quite well known for saying the Latin phrase “simul justis et peccator” which translated means “at the same time we are both righteous and sinner.” Maybe country music star George Jones was reading Luther when he wrote the song Sinners and Saints which included these lines:

**Johnny's in the jailhouse sleeping it off
Church folks saying that his soul is lost
Man, you should have seen all their
faces turn red**

**Just this morning when the preacher
man said**

**The only thing different tween sinners
and saints**

Is one is forgiven and the other one ain't

George is in heaven now where I'm sure he is playing to large crowds of heavenly saints.

But not unlike a law of physics which says, "If this / then that," there is also a kind of law of the human condition which says, something like: Try as we might, sometimes it can seem that we just cannot keep from tripping over our good intentions.

The Apostle Paul tells us that the work of Christ relieves us from the burden of imagining that we can work our way to salvation by the keeping of the law.

Theologian Paul Tillich will say it quite succinctly. He said that the burden

Jesus wants to relieve us of is the burden of religion. Again, Paul put it that we are invited to lean into what he called the Law of the Spirit. Through Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ we are invited into a new understanding and new way of being.

Paul will say that living with one's eyes fixed on the law and the keeping of the law is an infantile religiosity.

Knowledge of the law is basic, fundamental, and necessary to our ability to live together in community – yet if that is all we know, we know not enough. The law is the grammar school of ethics and spirituality. The law of the Spirit is graduate school. For when one walks in the Spirit, when one lives in the

space of the Law Giver, the law becomes second nature.

I think that Paul might put it something like this: The soul that is truly in love with Christ, with the divine source, with God, with the Holy has no need to be constantly checking the rulebook any more than someone riding a bicycle has to carry a manual reminding them to look where they are going, and to hold onto the handle bars.

Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden, Christ says. At least in part this means to come to Christ with a kind of authenticity and vulnerability that comes from having a relationship with the Holy Spirit. And it means coming into relationship with the Holy

in something like a posture of surrender. And it means accepting the invitation to say a kind of ‘no’ to the tyranny of religiosity and a kind of ‘yes’ to the ways of the heart. When we do that we begin to understand what is meant by the term ‘resting in the Spirit.’

I end this morning with a story of one who has seen through the tyranny of a religion of law-keeping. It is a story of one who has, no doubt, discovered the law of the Spirit.

It seems that there were four clergypersons who were discussing the

merits of the various translations of the Bible. One liked the King James Version because of the beauty of the Elizabethan English found therein. Another liked the Revised Standard Version because it comes nearer the original Hebrew and Greek. Still another liked the New International Version because it embraces the colloquialism of modern English. But the fourth clergy person was silent. When asked her opinion she said, “Well, I liked my mother’s translation best.”

The others expressed surprise, one admitting that he did not know that her mother had translated the Bible. But she assured them that she had. “She

translated it,” she said, “into the everyday of her life, and for her she said it was the most convincing version she has ever seen.”

She was one who responded to the invitation of Christ to come to me - ye who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.

May we, by the grace of God, likewise have the wisdom to respond to this invitation from Jesus our Lord, Son of God who created and loves us all and who invites us to come and rest awhile. Rest in his peace and rest in his amazing grace.

Amen