

HIGHEST GOOD, DEEPEST CALL

Pentecost 14 – Cycle C: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 13:10-17

[At the beginning of the sermon, Pastor James sat down at the Sanctuary piano and sang Sammy Cahn and Jimmy van Heusen's song, Love and Marriage. He then continued...]

Now at seminary, we learned the original version of this song which has a slightly altered text from the one made famous by Frank Sinatra. It helped us understand readings such as this morning's. As I recall, it went something like this:

Law and gospel, law and gospel,/Go together like a cork and bottle,This I tell ya, brother, you can't have one without the other./Law and gospel, law and gospel,It's a paradox you can't un-cobble,/Ask the seminary, and they will say it's rudiment'ry./Try, try, try to separate them, it's an illusion./Try, try, try and you [can] only come to this conclusion:/Law and gospel, law and gospel/Hang together like the twelve apostles,/Listen to your pastor, you can't have one/You can't have none,/You can't have one without the other.

I'm not sure I believe Jeremiah in today's First Reading when he tries to give all the credit (or blame) to God for his call as a prophet to the people of Judah. Knowing how reluctant he was to take up the prophetic task, I suspect a little "don't shoot the messenger" psychology is in play here. Nevertheless, his idea that God called him to this ministry does add authority to his message. And I cannot dispute that his call was authentic – authentic because it is clear from his message to the people that he had a profound love of God's law and just as profound a love for the One who had given the law to the Hebrew people. Yes, he had a vision, but his love of God and of the Covenant that God had made with the Hebrew people through Moses was the context of his vision.

What Jeremiah could see in Judah in its last years before the fall to Babylon was a people and a monarchy who had turned their back on both the Law and the Lawgiver. In place of God's law, they were writing their own; they had suspended the constitution, so to speak, and had moved into survival mode. Opportunism, nationalism, and elitism had ruined Judah; they had taken matters into their own hands and become a law unto themselves, Jeremiah says in so many words. They had lost their moral centre and abandoned the gracious call that had formed them as a holy people, the apple of God's eye. Jeremiah's message is that because the people had broken the Covenant, their fall to the enemy was inevitable. Later in the book, after most of the people had been exiled from Judah, Jeremiah counsels repentance and hope in God's faithfulness; but clearly he feels that the people have brought their present suffering upon themselves. In God's law, they have been called to the highest good, and they have rejected it, Jeremiah preaches.

In today's Gospel, Jesus challenges one more "ism" – the one we know as "legalism". In the account we read from Luke, the leader of the synagogue in which Jesus was teaching confronts Jesus for defiling the Sabbath by doing work. The "work" Jesus did was, we understand, the healing of the woman who had been crippled for eighteen years. Luke tells us that she was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. Jesus calls her to come to him, and he proclaims for her the good news that she is set free from her ailment, lays his hands on her, and heals her. "Immediately," we read, "she stood up straight and began praising God."

Without question, Jesus is mindful of the call of God's law and, as we know from his teaching and preaching, he feels an intimate connection with God, the giver of the law. But, we see – and this is the teaching moment – that he is as deeply called by compassion, and cannot deny his healing gifts for those who are suffering. He understands the law well enough to know that God's law is good; that it is not God's will that the woman should be so miserable and disabled. The leader of the synagogue faults Jesus because he interprets Jesus' actions as Gospel trumping Law. It is not, Jesus shows both his opponent and the crowd. It is compassion trumping legalism. Just as love is at the heart of the Gospel, so love is at the heart of the Law; and the two expressions of God's will may appear at times to be in conflict with one another, but they cannot be separated. This is why justice is the precondition for peace. It is why our God is the God of new beginnings and second chances. At one and the same time, the

people of God, the followers of the Lord Jesus are called to live according to the highest good and serve according to the deepest call.

I sincerely believe that we must seek to live by this truth. Although our country is politically stable, we are similar to the people of ancient Judah in that we have become a law unto ourselves concerning our environment, the natural world, what people of faith describe as God's Good Creation. Certainly the gospel of the natural world is all around us, especially in this amazing summer of bountiful produce; but the law of this same world is that its resources are not inexhaustible and that we do have the power to destroy the very components that are necessary for survival. In the news this week, environmentalists and farmers are sounding the alarm about honey bees. Ten million hives or approximately 35% of the bee population in North America has been killed within the last few years. Some scientists credit monoculture; others credit genetically-modified pest-resistant corn; the latest science credits pesticides and fungicides that have somehow altered bees' resistance to a tiny mite that eventually kills them.

The gospel in this situation is that we are able to name several of the conditions that have led to this crisis in apiculture. The law in play is that fungicides and pesticides and monoculture and genetic modification of certain crops tamper with the fragile balance of nature. In a very this-world sense, we see how useless the gospel is if we take it for granted or discredit it, and how final the laws of nature are if we turn our backs on them. Law and gospel cannot be separated. God's magic, the gospel, is in ample-but-not-limitless supply; but as the children of God, we must also live under God's law of care for the gift we have been given. We are not to kill; we are not to place ourselves before God.

In today's Gospel, there is something else. Jesus actually does something with the gifts he has been given. If he had merely talked to the woman and told her that God loved her in spite of her suffering and disability, the gospel would not have been proclaimed. His words would have been pious blather. Living under the banner of law and gospel, Jesus shows us, means doing something; it means becoming involved and using whatever gifts we have to show the compassion that lies at the heart of both law and gospel. It means living by the highest good and serving according to the deepest call. It means that we *become* Jesus' proclamation of law and gospel for our own time and place. It means that we become Jesus' hands and feet and heart in a world that has forgotten that he died so that we might live. Law and gospel: we can't have one without the other.