

The Bible passages we just heard are the kind that tend to make people squirm.

*“If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today...”*

*“I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment...”*

*“If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away...”*

We got a good dose of law and judgement — which, from what I’ve heard in so many Bible studies, are not the parts of the Bible that Lutherans usually like to focus on. We are all about grace and forgiveness. Judgement? That’s for those *other* Christians. We’ve seen the light. We’ve gotten beyond the judgement hang-up.

But today’s readings offer the opportunity to remind ourselves that the Lutheran way of reading scripture is to listen for God’s Word in the law as well as in the gospel. The convicting words of the law that make us squirm are as much a part of God’s work of salvation as are the comforting words of the gospel.

The official Lutheran way of explaining it is known as the Three Uses of the Law:

1. The law acts like a curb that keeps both Christians and non-Christians from doing wrong.
2. The law acts like a mirror, reflecting what God created life to be like so that we can see how we don’t measure up, and repent.
3. The law acts as a guide: those of us who know we are forgiven seek to thank God for this great gift and to embrace God’s work in our hearts to make us new creations, and the law helps us understand how to live as thankful children of God.

Contrary to a lot of misunderstanding of Luther’s teachings, we don’t say, “God forgives us! We’re free!” and throw away the law. We just know that its judgement on us is not the final word and should not make us panic, but rather the law should help us — even when it convicts us first.

I’ve also come to understand the connection between the convicting work of the law and the redeeming work of the gospel in another way. What most helps me to see the God who gave all those laws in the Old Testament as the same God doing the same gospel work as the God who came to us in Christ — What helps me to understand how the Jesus who said “this is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins,” could also say something like, “anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgement” — is

to think about how the law and the gospel are so inseparable, connected like two sides of the same coin. Let me begin to explain what I mean with a story.

This story comes from the life of a pastor who served a tiny rural congregation in southern Illinois in the early 1970s. Early in his very first call a member of his congregation, Rose, asked to speak with him. The pastor knew that her husband, Seth, had a reputation for drinking too much. But Rose told him that the problem was much, much worse than that: Seth beat her and the children, and he knew how to do it in ways that would not leave bruises, so no one else would suspect anything. He was paranoid to the point of being delusional, he carried a gun, and once he stormed into the emergency room of a hospital, pulling a gun on a nurse and demanding that “she remove the electrodes from his head.”

The pastor begged Rose to do something, to call the police, to file a complaint with Social Services, but she refused. Finally one evening the pastor answered the phone to hear Rose say, “He punched me again. We’re scared.” The pastor called the sheriff, and they all met at Seth and Rose’s house. The pastor wrote about that night:

*The sheriff consulted with Rose, who complained that Seth was threatening the entire family. But Seth, who could pretend rationality for limited periods of time, dismissed her fears, reminding the lawmen, “Look, boys, I’m standing here on my own property. Nobody’s been hurt, I hahn’t done nothing wrong. You can’t arrest a man on his own front lawn for not doing nothing wrong, can you?”*

*The sheriff was stumped. “I reckon he’s got us.” Then summoning his full authority, he declared to Rose and me, “I cannot arrest a law-abiding citizen on his own land.”*

*I said, “This man has used his fists on his wife and son repeatedly. Sure, he’s standing on his own property. And when you leave, he’s going to walk in his own house and beat the hell out of her. Can’t you see that he is menacing her right now? Sheriff, I am going to hold you responsible for this. By the way, did I tell you he usually carries a gun?”*

*At this last revelation, the sheriff’s eyebrow twitched. “Now, look, Reverend, you can climb down off’n your high horse. It ain’t my fault that this little lady has four kids and a crazy man for a husband, but it ain’t no law against being crazy. If’n I arrest him for nothing, like you want me to, you won’t bear the blunt of it. I will. Do you have a restraining order? Of course you don’t. The man ain’t trespassing on his own front yard.”*

*“What if he were trespassing?” I asked.*

*“Then I could cuff him,” he said with a chortle. “Let’s say he was at your house and you didn’t want him on the premises, then I could take him.”*

*“Then let’s go to the church office,” I said, “and we’ll let him trespass there, and you, sir, can arrest him.”*

So Rose and the kids, the pastor, and the sheriff get into their cars and head to the church. “To my amazement,” the pastor wrote, “Seth hopped in his truck and followed the patrol car.”

*At the church I hastily opened the sacristy and arranged the desk and chairs as if for a counseling session. Rose quickly led the children into the parish hall and then entered the sacristy. The sheriff and his deputy stood to the side of the entrance. With Rose seated nervously in front of the desk, Seth, who by this time was focused like a homing device on his wife, walked up the steps and barged into the sacristy.*

*I said, “Seth, Rose and I are having a counseling session. It’s private. I’m asking you to leave.”*

*Seth said, “This is my church, and this is my wife. I’m not leaving without her. What are you going to do about it?”*

*I stepped to the door, motioned to the sheriff, and said, “He’s trespassing. Arrest him.”*

*The law entered the church and took him without a struggle.<sup>1</sup>*

What this pastor did is definitely a sketchy legal move; he even admitted it was entrapment. I’ll leave it to all the lawyers and law enforcement officials we’ve got around here to debate whether he did the right thing from that perspective. What I want to think about this morning is *why* he did what he did. And I imagine that one of the things running through his mind that night was, “What is the law for? Who is the law for?” Based on his actions, it seems he believed that the law’s number one purpose was to protect Rose and the kids. The law was there for the victims of violence and injustice. He was willing to do some manipulating, to make some questionable choices, in order to make sure the law was doing its job of protecting the people that most needed protecting in that moment.

For Seth the law was intrusive, it kept him from being free to live as he was living, it was demanding and threatening (even as it tried to work for him). But for Rose, that same law must have felt more like gospel.

I think the same can be said for the times we hear God’s law through scripture. We hear, “anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery...” and maybe we start to worry about our own divorce, or our friends’ divorces, which were arranged on very different grounds. We hear the big scary law. But at the time, women hearing that may have breathed a sigh of relief that their husbands could not cast them away from home and their only source of economic security without cause...they may have heard gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets*, (New York: Broadway Books, 2002) pp. 132-134.

We hear, “If you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire,” (by the way that part about hellfire is probably a common turn of phrase, an exaggerated metaphor, not an actual rule of damnation). But even so, we hear that and think, “Well, that’s pretty harsh.” But if we’re the ones constantly being insulted or called names or verbally abused...we might hear gospel there.

Laws are for both perpetrator and victim...laws are not individualistic, they are for the whole community. And while they bring some people down, they lift up others — and they offer life to the community.

Like it says in our Deuteronomy reading: “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.”

Today we continue the age-old journey of seeking to live according to God’s will in the midst of laws and interpretations, in the midst of biblical laws and secular laws. It can be difficult to know when to obey to the letter, and when to say, “I’ve heard it said, but Jesus said to us...” But if we “choose life,” if we seek the good of the community and of God’s creation, perhaps that will keep us a little closer to God’s path. And most of all we can be confident that we will always be surrounded by God’s grace, guiding us in the law and forgiving us in the gospel.