

Sermon Notes – June 4, 2017

“A Positive Rule”

Michael Webster

- Today’s reading is about law, or about rules. We love rules – the more rules, the better. Maybe not.
- We all chafe about rules we don’t like or that we think don’t make sense or that don’t seem to apply to us. What in the world is dangerous about glancing at a text on my cellphone while I’m stuck in a line of traffic at a red light? Instead, I drive all the way home before I find out that Debbie wanted me to pick up something on my way. Grrr.
- So, we don’t always like rules. But most of us have some rules to live by. Lots of us believe firmly that “what comes around, goes around.” In the church, ministers and UCWs expect that “funerals come in threes.” A scientific examination of our funeral records would probably show that it’s not true, but I still believe it.
- The internet is full of laws.
 - The law of wing-walking: Don’t let go of one thing until you’ve got hold of something else.
 - The law of restaurants: Your server will only ask how your food is when your mouth is full.
 - The law of deals: If it’s too good to be true, it probably is.
 - Or this one: If everything is coming your way, you’re in the wrong lane.
- Murphy’s law – if something can go wrong it will – has been around in one form or another for centuries, but it got its current name in 1948 from USAF Captain Edward Murphy, who found that some sensors in a deceleration test had been wired backwards. Murphy’s Law became a watchword for the development of safety procedures in the aviation industry and the early space program.
- Satchel Paige, the great African-American baseball pitcher, had a number of rules to live by:

- The best-known is: Don't look back, because something might be gaining on you.
 - 50 years before anyone heard of cholesterol, he said: Don't eat fried food. It angries up the blood.
 - His advice to young pitchers: Just take the ball and throw it. Throw strikes. Home plate don't move.
 - If you tell a lie, always rehearse it. If it don't sound good to you, it won't sound good to no one else.
 - And finally, a rule for church people: Don't pray when it rains if you don't pray when the sun shines.
- What these rules tend to have in common is that they are expressed negatively. Don't do this, don't do that. Thou shalt not.
 - So it's a wonder that Jesus expressed his rule of life – the golden rule – positively: Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.
 - Many philosophers and religious leaders had said something similar, but as far as I know, had always done so in the negative: Don't do to someone else what you wouldn't want them to do to you. There's nothing wrong with that. It's similar to the rule that doctors follow: First, do no harm.
 - But Jesus turned it around. Instead of saying, Don't do bad stuff, he demanded much more of his followers. He said: Do good stuff. It's the difference between walking by and stopping to help. In the world we live in, we've got enough people who are willing to sit back and do no harm. That's fine as far as it goes, but we need people of faith, Christians, followers of Jesus, church people, you and me to step up and be a force for good in the world.
 - It frustrates me that so many people associate faith, the church, the Bible with Thou shalt not, with negativity. I think the Bible and our faith are a source of so much that is positive. Today's reading from Jeremiah is one of the most exciting and positive passages found anywhere in scripture.
 - Jeremiah is not known for being positive. He spent most of his career warning his people that they were going in the wrong direction as a nation and that it was going to cost them dearly. For his troubles, he

was laughed at and ostracized. He ended up unmarried, friendless and imprisoned.

- But when the people did get in trouble, just as he said they would, then he offered them hope. He talked about God's love. He began sentences with "even though." Even though you did such-and-such, we can fix it. Even though ... together we can do better. Even though ... God has something new to offer.
- And then Jeremiah says something truly remarkable, and one of my five fav passages: The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with my people, and this is it: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
- The days are surely coming – that's a reference to the Jubilee, which is a time for doing things in a new way. But the covenant isn't new at all. I will be their God, and they shall be my people. That goes all the way back to Moses. Even in Jeremiah's day, that covenant was already centuries old.
- What's new is this: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. It's one thing to know the rules, whether positive or negative – do this, don't do that. It's another thing to follow them, and another thing entirely to want to follow them.
- I will write it on their hearts. Our God is a literate God, a God, we're told, who wrote on stone tablets 800 years before Jeremiah, and who promises to write again. A literate God, a God who expects the people to read, is One who values education, a God who is not troubled by knowledge or by scientific inquiry, even if it leads us to question some of the stories of our faith.
- Jeremiah's promise is that the law will no longer be written on carefully guarded scrolls or stored under glass in a temple facility too sacred to be visited by the likes of you or me. It will be written on our hearts.
- For Jeremiah, the heart is not the seat of emotions, as it is for us. Rather, it is the seat of the will. The law, the rules for right living, will

be written on our sense of will. They will become part of our purpose.

- And that brings us to Pentecost, which announced, with fire and wind, the arrival of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus promised would be our ... well, our what? The word Jesus used is variously translated as Helper, Advocate, Counselor, Comforter, Intercessor. Some translators just give up and anglicize the Greek word: Paraclete. Literally it means “one who is called alongside.” I don’t think you’ll find it in any Bible, but my translation is “Companion.”
- And to be filled with the Holy Spirit is, I believe, to bring Jeremiah’s words to life – to have God’s will written upon our hearts. It is for God’s desires to be our desires.
- You see, I don’t believe that the life of faith is a life of denial but is rather a life of fulfillment. I’m going to say more about that next Sunday, but for now let me say simply that I agree with Irenaeus, a bishop in the early church, who wrote in the second Century, “The Glory of God is the human being fully alive,” and with Jesus, who said that he came so we might have life and have it abundantly.
- I will write my law upon their hearts. The promise of God is not that we will have to live our lives a certain way but that we will want to. The life of faith is an internal transformation by the power of God’s Spirit such that, if we commit ourselves to a life of faith, we will want to live faithfully.
- And what does it mean to live faithfully? What does it mean to be God’s people? It means to offer to others what God offers to us.
- Micah said: Do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.
- Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of When Bad Things Happen to Good People, said: Don’t do something for someone because of who they are or what they can do for you but because of who you are.
- We can say it in different ways, but it comes down to liberation and justice. Liberation from slavery and greed and consumerism and pride and any number of our modern idolatries. And a fair deal and dignified treatment for society’s weak and vulnerable ones.

- There are other ways to say it, but I'll leave you with one of my favourites, this one not from the Bible but from John Wesley:
 - Do all the good you can,
 - By all the means you can,
 - In all the ways you can,
 - In all the places you can,
 - At all the times you can,
 - To all the people you can,
 - As long as ever you can.