

Sermon: Gospel Truth and Lawful Order**Scripture: Psalm 1, Matthew 9:9-13****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: October 22, 2017**

We thank Tracy, my wife, one of our resident Catholics and a member of St. Mary's here in Winchester, for reading this morning to support our Reformation series. Her presence in part reminds us that this is not an us against them thing but the reforms of the 16th century were Catholic which resulted in the formation of protestant churches but also reforms within the Catholic Church as well. I am very personally grateful that Catholics and Protestants have come a long way and can now stand side by side and marry one another and work together rather than be at each other's throats. There's room for us Protestants to confess the sins that pretty quickly and heinously arose out of the Reformation and followed us to America in the form of violence and discrimination against Jews and Catholics. It's important that we remember that darker side of the Reformation, that even Martin Luther himself encouraged, even as we celebrate its 500-year anniversary. It simply wasn't a matter of finally getting things right. That, I'm afraid, won't happen until the end of times when God finally does the getting-it-right Godself.

But it doesn't mean we shouldn't try to get it right. Just that we should be clear that we can only get so far in that effort and that is fundamental reformation theology. Today's reformation theme is "law and gospel" and one way of describing it is just that – law is the effort to

get it right and gospel is the recognition that in the end it's God's grace and God's grace – in other words the Gospel – that saves us.

We just sang from the Old testament Psalm 1 – “happy are they who follow the law of the Lord” and from a Christian reformed perspective, albeit a inaccurate to some extent, God's covenant with the Hebrew people was defined by laws that governed the human-divine relationship, exactly how the Hebrew people should live in this world under God's reign down to the smallest details of what they ate and how they made their clothes to the broadest concerns about how they worshipped and governed their people; which made it really clear what exactly it meant to be in a committed relationship of love with God. And what was radical and beautiful about the Jewish law was that it made it really clear that everything did in fact impinge upon that relationship. It wasn't like God was up there in the heavens doing his thing and we were down here doing ours until we sent up a prayer there and got God's attention. It was radically, *everything* we do down here matters to God and involves God. So, yes, “thou shalt not commit adultery” is a divine law that we are expected to follow because our faithfulness to the people around us matters to God, our word, our devotion matters in every way. And “thou shall not eat pork for it is unclean”, as strange as that sounds to us, to ancient Israelites, pigs flesh over a spit was far too similar to human flesh in pagan sacrificial rituals and God cares about what we do to one another. Thus the laws of the Old Testament dictating everything that people did under the assumption that God cares intimately about what we do, I mean, really cares, and there are

ways of living that align with grace and there are ways of living that counter it.

But as is typical of any and every human institution and endeavor, we can so easily get attached to the form and lose sight of the original intent and function. And that's where Jesus came in, like the prophets before him, he took the religious leaders to task for getting too focused on observance of the law and forsaking the purpose of it. So throughout the gospels we read of Jesus being drawn to and surrounded by the people of the land, the downtrodden, the poor, the maimed, the blind, the outcasts, the lepers, epileptics, and the demon possessed, almost every single type of person who was excluded from the synagogues and understood by the religious establishment as being out of God's grace. Matthew the tax collector was a case in point and Jesus not only ate with him but he called him as one of his disciples, one of the most despicable people of the day – Jesus' disciple. And this did not go over well with those attached to the law, those who worked hard to follow the law of the Lord, that Jesus was offering God's grace and forgiveness for those who didn't follow the law, those in many cases who knew nothing of the law.

And the reformers noticed this when they read the scriptures and they said "Oh, wait a minute, Jesus isn't requiring anyone to follow the law in order to be saved but Jesus is coming to them to save them regardless... and actually, the law seems quite clearly to be a hindrance to receiving Jesus if the Pharisees are any indication." And they made the leap, which wasn't too hard to make, of Jewish over-adherence to the law in the time of Jesus and the Catholic Church's over-adherence to

the laws they had established in their own time and - vroom! - the Reformation ignited! For the church had become lost in the enforcement and insistence upon the law and sustaining their own power and institution forgetting what they were there for in the first place – to be conveyors of God’s grace and to foster the people’s relationship with God.

But it IS somewhat tricky because how does a church foster people’s relationship with God and be conveyors of God’s grace in a sinful world when there’s a lot that works against God’s grace and a lot that stands in the way of our relationship with God? There must be some guidance, right? There must be some guidelines, some rules, some laws that are understood to help us align to God and God’s purpose, that helps us to work at getting things right. We do that with our children – that is hurtful, you simply cannot do that. You must do this because this is right and that is wrong. Can the church still have the authority to operate like that with Her children? Or has the church blown it one too many times – used its authority to hurt others and promote itself - to carry much authority for us these days? But if we are all lavish grace and no law do we become like a spiritual spa, really? Another business in a society glutted with businesses, vying for people’s time and people’s attention saying “come here, give your money here, be a member here and this is what you’ll get out of it”. Rather than a more essential place of wisdom and authority for our lives that really does have something to say about every aspect of your life –what you buy and drive and how you live and where you work and the integrity of how you work, and

how you live in relationship with your husband and your kids and your wife, and what you do with your money.

“But”, you protest, “I don’t want the church doing that for me, doing that to me! Let it be an organization in a long line of organizations in my life that vies for my attention rather than a place that is keeping tabs on me and telling me how to live and how not to live. Step off Reverend Will, we’ve seen how that story ends!” And you know, you’d be right. For the women and the men of the reformation, many of whom died for the principles they promoted, handed us the way forward. They established that it is not – in fact - the business of the church to be getting into people’s business, UNLESS and only unless the church is showing how scripture and scripture alone gets into people’s business. So they left the legacy that understands the church as the body that comes together to read and interpret scripture, each and everyone of us together and together we decide how to live it out and which ways are God’s ways and which ways are not. The reformers left us with a church democratically run with God as it’s head and everyone equally contributing to the effort through scripture and prayer to discern God purposes and desire for each of us and all of us. I’m not saying we do that perfectly, but we are designed well for that purposes and for that we should be glad. AND for that we should gladly give to make what we do here possible.

Nice segue right? Cause this is the beginning of our Stewardship Campaign when we remember that our church is not financially sustained by some higher church of greater resources and authority, but this church of God is sustained financially by you and me and what we

commit to give for the year ahead. That's how we keep this beautiful building up and the lights on and the programs running and how we serve the world with love and grow in faith, by each one of us contributing to God's church. Need I point out that this is a very different thing than the way the medieval church did things. Giving was not exactly voluntary and you did not then have a say in how the money that went to the church was used and spent. But because of the Reformation, we do church differently and we only do what we as a completely egalitarian community discern we should do and only what we each make it possible to do by what we give. The way we do church is different from a democracy because it's not majority rule, but ideally God rule with the majority discerning how best to follow God's rule. It's a beautiful way of doing church that has its roots deep within our Protestant tradition, which had its roots deep within the Christian tradition whose roots are deep within Judaism. And out of those holy roots come holy branches and new shoots living lives of service and commitment to God.

May we ever find the way to live and love and serve together as a church to honor God and be aligned to that great divine movement to make it on earth as it is in heaven, amen!