

15 Pentecost Yr A, 10/09/2023
Ps 119:33-40 & Rom 13:8-10
Pastor Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“Love fulfils God’s law”

There was once a little boy named Jimmy who always wanted to know what was right and what was wrong in every situation. He continually pestered his parents with questions about right and wrong. No matter who he was with or where they were, sooner or later he would ask a question about right and wrong.

“Dad,” he would say, “I saw some kids eating grapes in the grocery store, and they didn’t pay for them when they left. They said they only took a few and were sure no one would miss them. Is that right?”

“No, it’s not right,” his Dad said. “You should never take anything from a store without paying for it, even something as small as a grape. What those kids did was stealing. The store owners have to pay for everything they have for sale. When people steal things the stores have to raise prices on other items to make up the difference. People who take things without paying are really stealing from everyone who shops in the store. It’s just not right.”

“I’ll try to remember that,” said Jimmy.

Or, Jimmy would say, “Mom, is it ever right to break a rule?” “Well,” his mom said, pausing to think about the question, “there might be some very rare instances when the only loving thing to do would be to break a rule. But those kinds of situations are very rare. I don’t think you need to worry about it.”

“I’ll have to think about that,” Jimmy said. He tried to imagine a situation where breaking a rule would be the loving thing to do, but he couldn’t think of a single instance where he would be willing to break a rule. He had almost forgotten about the question when something drastic happened that forced him to make a life or death decision that involved breaking a rule.

It happened one day when Jimmy and his grandpa were fishing in a motor boat out on the lake. It was a beautiful day, and they were having a wonderful time telling stories and drinking pop as they fished. Jimmy's grandpa was a great storyteller, and Jimmy loved to listen to him tell about all the big fish he had caught. He didn't mind that the fish seemed to get bigger each time Grandpa told about them. Suddenly, in the middle of one of Jimmy's favourite fish stories, his grandpa clutched his chest and fell forward into the middle of the boat. He lay there without moving or saying a word. Jimmy tried to turn him over, but he was too heavy. He could tell that Grandpa was breathing, but he knew he was very sick and needed to see a doctor as soon as possible.

Jimmy was scared. He had never been more scared in all of his life. There they were, in a boat out in the middle of the lake. His grandpa had told him never to start the motor or to try to operate the boat by himself. Grandpa said, "When you are old enough, I'll teach you how to drive the boat." Jimmy didn't know what to do. He tried rowing the boat, but he wasn't strong enough to work the oars. He felt like crying, but he knew that wouldn't do any good. He knew that he had to do something and do it soon, because if he didn't his grandpa might die.

He prayed, "Dear God, what is the right thing to do?" And then he knew. He would have to start the motor and try to drive the boat. It was the only way to save his grandpa's life.

The motor started with one pull. Now came the hard part. Jimmy had never driven anything but a bicycle. But he had watched his grandpa drive the boat many times. He did what he remembered seeing Grandpa do, and they were off. The boat didn't go perfectly straight, but he managed to get it back to the shore. Then he ran to the nearest house and called for help. An ambulance came and took his grandpa to the hospital. The doctor told him later that they got him there just in the nick of time. A few more minutes, and they would not have been able to save him.

When Jimmy went into the hospital room to see his grandpa, he was a little bit afraid of what Grandpa might say about him driving the boat, but he needn't have worried. When his grandpa saw him, he smiled and gave him a big hug. And then he said, "Jimmy, you did just the right thing. Your quick thinking saved my life."

Jimmy smiled back at his grandpa. His heart was full of joy. He was glad he had done the right thing.¹ Jimmy was grateful that when he prayed, the LORD gave him the wisdom and understanding to do the right thing.

In both today's psalm and second lesson, we have examples of wanting to do the right thing. The psalmist prays to the LORD, like Jimmy in the story, he prays for wisdom and understanding to do the right thing—to obey God's law, God's commandments. In our Romans passage, the apostle Paul instructs both the Roman Christians and us to: "Love your neighbour as yourself." And then he states that: "Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law."

In both Psalm 119 and our Romans passage, the psalmist and the apostle Paul do not see the law as a burden, and a duty. No. Rather both the psalmist and Paul see the law, the commandments as rooted in God's love. God loves us, and therefore God gave us the law, the commandments, to help us live the way God wants us to live. So for both the psalmist and for Paul, as well as for us, we respond to God's love for us by wanting to please God, love God and love our neighbour. That makes all the difference in the world. As a pastor, when I used to teach confirmation, I could tell the difference between those who wanted to study and learn, and those who were there only because their parents told them they had to be in confirmation. The ones who wanted to be there were a pleasure and joy to teach, and they usually learned a lot more in confirmation than those who only felt they had to be there.

So, in today's psalm, which is the longest one—it has 176 verses, the psalmist prays to God for help to obey God by keeping the law, the commandments. Notice

¹ John E. Sumwalt, *Lectionary Stories, Cycle A: 40 Tellable Tales For Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter And Pentecost* (Lima, OH: C.S.S. Publishing Co., Inc., 1992), pp. 46-48.

the different words the psalmist uses here: statutes, law, commandments, decrees, ways, promise, ordinances, precepts, and righteousness. Even though they are different words, they all are synonymous, they all refer to God's law, God's commandments.

Basically, the psalmist repeats, in different phrases, the same prayer—he is asking God to help him keep the commandments. Repetition can be a blessing. You and I, all of us here, I hazard to guess, have experienced what musicians call an “earworm.” An earworm is a song or hymn or the tune of a song or hymn that gets stuck in our minds all day long. So too we might get what I call a “wordworm.” A wordworm is a passage of Scripture that we repeat in our minds all day. These wordworms can be a blessing because they can give us the help, the wisdom and understanding to be able to obey God's word by motivating us to do the right thing.

Let us pray: Teach us, O LORD, give us understanding, that we may keep your law, your commandments. In response to your love for us, Jesus, help us to love our neighbours, for love is the fulfilling of the law. Amen.