

The Journey Begins Anew
Psalm 119:33-40; Romans 13:8-14
September 10, 2017 – Rally Day – Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Well. . . Welcome to Rally Day. It's the beginning of a new program year here at NOUMC, and it's an exciting time in this church. Our church is formulating a Long Range Plan; we're thinking about, discussing, and planning for where we want to be in 2020 or 2025; and, at the same time, our church is paying attention to the present. We want to be certain that we *are* the church for today; as we plan for tomorrow. As we put plans in place, we need to work carefully, prayerfully, and lovingly to serve both current needs and future challenges. And I tell you, I am truly excited about this work. I'll be saying a lot more about this in coming weeks; but today, as we begin our new program year, let us consider two sections from our lectionary.

Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm in the Bible. I recently used it with a focus on verse 105: "Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." But today's reading speaks of our call to obey God's law:

"Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes. . .
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law. . .
Lead me in the path of your commandment. . ."

Now, I need to recognize that one of the commentators I read, Julie Peeples, suggested that clergy need to be careful with such verses. Peeples notes that many people today, especially younger people, believe the church is in the business of judging and condemning. They rebel against talk about God's law and God's commandments, as if God is just waiting to strike them down if they step out of line.¹ Such feelings are fueled by injustices that people have experienced in life. All too often we have these voices in the back of our heads condemning us. Maybe they are the voices of a less than perfect legal system. Maybe they are the voices of a less than loving relationship with parents or family members. Maybe they are the voices of friends who have betrayed us. Maybe they are the voices of society that condemns us because of who we are. All too often the church has echoed or even reinforced these voices to the detriment of the person involved. All too often the church has been the cause rather than the cure. And I'm here to tell you today, that is NOT God's call to the church.

I can't get inside the head of the Psalmist that wrote this prayer some 2500 years ago. I don't know what was on his mind. But I can tell you that, when I pray

¹ Julie Peeples, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4*, 32.

this prayer today, I am not praying to a judging, vengeful, wrathful God. No, I believe with all my heart that God is a God of love, of mercy, of goodness, and of peace. And still, I pray this prayer. I've stated before that one of the prayers that frequently wonders though my mind is actually a musical response:

“Lead me, Lord, lead me in thy righteousness;
make thy way plan before my face.
For it is thou, Lord, thou Lord only,
that makest me dwell in safety.” (UMH #473)

That's what this Psalm is about: “Teach me, O Lord, your ways. . . Lead me. . . Help me see the path you have set before me.” I think that's a prayer that is valid for each of us as individuals and as a church. But the psalmist takes this one step further. Along with asking that God would illumine the path, the prayer makes a commitment:

“I will observe your law;
I will delight in your commandments;
I will not work for selfish gain. . . “

It seems that too should be a prayer for each of us as individuals and for this church as a whole. So, you see, we're back to the relationship thing again. God wants to be in relationship with us, and so we pray that God will show us what that relationship looks like that we may follow; and in our following, come into relationship with God.

And this brings me to the Romans passage. It's somewhat reassuring that, as we struggle with passages from the Old Testament, apparently folks were struggling with those same passages two thousand year ago. For in the first century Paul wrote: “Don't be in debt to anyone, except for the *obligation* to love each other. Whoever loves another person has fulfilled the Law.” (Romans 13:8)

Paul continues: “The commandments, Don't commit adultery, don't murder, don't steal, don't desire what others have, and any other commandments, are all summed up in one word: You must love your neighbor as yourself. Love doesn't do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law.”(Romans 13:9-10)

I've quoted before the great theologian, Karl Barth. Someone once approach him saying, “Herr Barth, you've written dozens of book on Christian Theology and Biblical Studies. You've gone into great detail; but could you summarize all this for me.” Barth replied, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” I've stated before that one of the primary reasons I'm a United Methodist is the

Wesleyan Doctrine of Grace – and what’s Grace? God’s love for each of us – plain and simple. “Jesus loves me, this I know...”

And, as strongly as I believe God loves each and every one of us, I also believe that each of us, by virtue of our Christian baptism is called to share that love, I like to use the word to *radiate* that love to every person we meet, at all times and in all places. Love doesn’t do anything wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is what fulfills the Law.” (Thank you, Paul of Tarsus.)

Let’s consider another biblical writer and saint of the church, John the Evangelist. He writes in his first letter: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”(1 John 4:7-8)

And so, I highlight these two reading today. The first: the prayer that God will make his law known to us so we may follow; and the second, that ultimately the law boils do to those two great commandments: love God and love your neighbor, and I might add love yourself.

As we begin a new year here at North Olmsted UMC, let us keep these thoughts in the forefront of our minds. Let us move ahead into the year asking that God would lead us, lead us in the path that God would have us walk, lead us in the ways of love and peace.

I will be praying for our church. I will be praying that we may be the church for today and tomorrow, as we journey into the future. I will be praying for the work of our church leaders and our planning team. In the coming weeks, I’ll be highlighting some of the principles that we will be using as we plan for the coming year and the coming decade. Indeed, this is an exciting time; for I truly believe God has great plans for this church. May we as individuals and as a congregation have the courage, the faith, the strength and the love to follow where God leads.

May we join in that prayer, “Lead me Lord, lead me in your righteousness.” It’s number 473 in our hymnal. Let’s sing it together. . .