

HEART LAW
Sermon for Advent 4A-Mt 1:18-25
LPC, 12/18/16

This sermon is for those who want to follow Jesus. Or at least for those who want to live by a higher, more universal standard than that dictated by self-interest, or by one's own ego and appetites.

Now all of us are motivated by our own appetites and egos to some extent. We start out that way, as inarticulate infants, but by the time we are able to eat curds and honey we have developed a motivation to please our parents. This is the first step toward modelling our lives on a higher, external standard.

As we grow to adulthood, we naturally question many of the external behavioral standards we once accepted unquestioningly. Are our habitual standards still appropriate? In what ways are they limited? Are they perhaps unreasonable, unjust or even cruel? If so, can we just abandon them, or must we seek to change them? If we abandon our former external standards, what, if anything, takes their place?

Setting behavioral standards for oneself is part of maturity, of taking responsibility. However the need for some standard external to ourselves remains, or we revert to moral infancy: making ourselves the ultimate moral reference point. Unless, even as responsible adults, we appeal to a higher standard than ourselves, we run the risk of making self-interest, ego and appetite once again the determining factors in our behavior.

Law, of course, provides one external standard of behavior. Civil laws make it possible to live in society where people's self-interests might otherwise come into conflict. Some laws we accept gladly, like most of the criminal code, because they guarantee us life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Some laws we grumble about, but generally obey, like taxes. Some laws we assume don't apply to us, like speed limits.

But civil laws do not, cannot, and in my opinion, should not, govern all of our behavior. We can accept civil law and still need another standard to by which to govern our behavior in more intimate ways.

It is possible to follow or create a higher standard of behavior without appealing to God. Philosophers have been doing this for millennia. But people of faith tend to vest their higher standards in a supreme, divine being.

The biblical people of Israel famously did this in the Abrahamic Covenant, which was expressed in Jewish Law. If you read the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, you find plenty of external behavioral standards, governing everything from marital relations to the consumption of bats (which by the way is prohibited.)

People made, and still make, careers of figuring out exactly what God wants us to do in specific situations. But no matter how comprehensive a written code may be, people will still need a higher, more universal standard, to which to appeal when the unforeseen happens.

Even with people appeal to higher, more universal standards, people feel often conflicted, especially when their own egos and appetites get in the way. So, since biblical times, people have not only sought this higher external standards, but they also, paradoxically, have sought to internalize their external standard to such an extent that godly behavior becomes instinctive.

Thus, the Hebrew God promises to write God's law, not only on stone tablets, like the Ten Commandments, but on people's hearts. The Prophet Jeremiah quotes God as saying that the people of Israel, unlike their ancestors in Egypt, will obey God because, "I will put my law within them, and I will write in on their hearts."

The Letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament references this passage twice in arguing that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Law. There echoes of this phrasing in our own Prayer Book. In the Penitential Order for Rite One, the recitation of the Decalogue ends with the prayer, "Lord, have mercy upon us, and write all these thy laws in our hearts, we beseech thee." This is on page 318, if you want to check it out.

Like the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, the evangelist Matthew is concerned with demonstrating that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Hebrew law. This concern emerges in the first words of Matthew's Gospel. In the passage immediately preceding this one Matthew lists every generation from Abraham to "Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah."

Notice that Joseph is thus never described as Jesus' natural father. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is *God's* own Son, but Matthew also emphasizes that Joseph will claim Jesus as his own. This is made clear in the angel's message about what Joseph shall name the child. Naming a child was an official act of recognizing the child as one's own. In this case, Joseph, the son of Israel, is recognizing Jesus as one of Israel's own.

There are a million remarkable things about this story, but one is that Joseph, who is supposed to be a good Jew, resolves to defy the Jewish law. He is engaged to Mary, and in those days engagement was as binding as marriage. Therefore, the discovery that she is pregnant, and, as Joseph knows better than anybody, not by him, indicates that Mary is guilty of adultery. As we know from elsewhere in the Gospels, the penalty for adultery for the woman is stoning to death. In refusing to denounce Mary, Joseph is not just sparing her embarrassment, he is sparing her very life.

Joseph does this, the scripture tells us, out of righteousness. This is a new interpretation of the concept of righteousness, which in the Hebrew Scriptures is equated with obeying the letter of the Law. But Joseph is not obeying the letter of the Law. He is being righteous, in the new sense, by being unrighteous in the traditional sense. He is allowing himself to be guided by a higher standard than the Law itself. It is not the Law written in stone that he obeys, but God's law written on his heart ... the law embodied in Jesus ... the law of love. Before he is even born, Jesus both fulfills the sacred Law and represents a higher, more universal standard than even the sacred Law. The higher law that Jesus represents is the law of love.

Lord, have mercy upon us, and write *this* thy law on *our* hearts, we beseech thee.