

Deuteronomy 16:18-20; 25:4
Matthew 18:23-35

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 22, 2009

Trumping Justice

You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading the grain (*Deuteronomy 25:4*).

Out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt (*Matthew 18:27*).

Over the years America has often been characterized as a “Christian nation.” The United States is also a nation committed to operate under the rule of law—though there are several instances of late where the ground gets shaky on that score. However, what our Scriptures ask of us this morning, is not to what degree these statements are true, but to what degree they are compatible.

The rule of law exists, I think it fair to say, in the service of justice. Yet our Christian faith, as exhibited by Jesus, exists not to be content with justice—if ever that were attainable—but to strive in all things for *grace*. I want to propose that Justice and grace are often two worlds apart, maybe even totally incompatible.

One of my seminary professors, who taught philosophical theology, was named Diogenes Allen (isn't that a splendid name for a philosopher!) Born in a holler in West Virginia, he went on to become a Rhodes Scholar. He taught one course—among so many that were memorable—called “The Concept of Love.” In it, we wrestled with the distinction between the love of God for us, and the love we have for God and each other. There isn't supposed to be a difference, but in actuality, there's an immense divide.

After class, my head still spinning, I walked to lunch in the Campus Center. I still recall a moment of insight on that brief walk so startling that I eagerly engaged any unsuspecting table mate who would listen.

It was this. Jane and I were married when I was almost 27. But I didn't just choose Jane by sticking a pin in the telephone book for the town of Wilson, North Carolina (wasn't that civil of them to name the town after me!) I'd never come close before to getting married, or ever considered proposing. I was, perhaps like most of us, very choosy. The young women I dated over the years I mentally sifted, weighed and scrutinized, but not one could I give my heart to. Until I met this stunning red head in the flared green dress all covered with big red lady-bugs, the puff sleeves, and enchanting smile. And I lost my heart to Dixie!

Now consider how cautious and particular I was. Yet God does just the opposite—profligate, scoundrel, saint or sinner, floundering faith, lifelong disciple, honest doubter, to everyone without exception God says—I make no distinction. I keep no ledger sheet with faults in the debit column and faithfulness in the credits. All I ask, God says, is that you trust me. I love you. And you, and you, and you—and on and on. That's the difference between our love of God, and God's love of us. Also between Justice and grace. Between the way we dole out love sparingly, and the miraculous munificence of God's grace that admits no distinction among us.

As if to endorse that grace always trump's justice in God's economy, the *word* justice is as quiet as the grave in the Old Testament, and almost as absent in the New Testament. Among the miniscule exceptions are the injunction to appoint fair judges, in our Deuteronomy reading, and the little verse about not muzzling the ox when it's treading out the grain. Why the latter, because as a creature in God's creation animals are to be accorded the same justice as people. If the ox works ten hours a day under the grueling sun treading out *our* grain, must it not also eat to do its work?

Still, even a concept of justice is bound up in things like fairness. We stress justice as having qualities like parity, and the fitness of the punishment to suit the crime. And still, justice at its best is imperfect. It cannot undo the crime. It can seldom balance the loss to the injured with adequate retribution. It cannot change or forgive what is past. When a judge once passed sentence on the guilty party, and the complainant angrily demanded "Where is my justice. I thought this was a court of justice!" The judge sympathetically answered, "Madam, you misunderstand. This is not a court of justice, it is a court of law." The law cannot give full retribution.

Grace is a product of a different universe. It does what is incomprehensible to us, even, by our judgment, what is grossly unfair. Grace forgives enemies, as Jesus asked of us. It turns the other cheek to the unprompted slap in the face. To turn the other cheek was not to merely double the insult but to magnify it, because it reversed the former arc with malicious back of the hand punch. Grace dies, in Jesus' case so that his unwarranted suffering and death can assume our warranted guilt—*upon one guiltless*. Listen to these lines from Jesus.

And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

Grace provides a way for us to get to God, even when our indifference, or sometimes malice, or anger blame God and we blow up the bridge claiming that God could have or should have intervened in some loss. Grace forgives the penitent sinner and gives the same heavenly justice to the less than perfect plaintiff. This is Jesus' point in the parable of the debtor servant, who owes an incomprehensibly massive debt to his master, and is summarily forgiven. (I intentionally did not finish the parable in which the servant then exacts retribution for a miniscule debt from another, and is punished for his gross lack of compassion.)

I ask you, as we close, to consider the manuscript of you life, your personal history. What if you could step back in time and see how much or how little of life around you was different for your *not* having been here, like the vision given George Bailey of Bedford Falls near the end of the movie, "It's a Wonderful Life."

Imagine that someone else now lives in your house, or built a different one where yours now stands. Imagine that the friends that you and your children have cultivated had never known you in their circle. That your parents have no photos of you and your children on the piano in their living room. Or, at Thanksgiving or Christmas, that they make your journeys elsewhere. Your work would be done by another, and the desk you use would have a strangers' clutter on it. Your place in the pew, on the church board or committee, or in Sunday school would be taken by another. Even the IRS wouldn't have you in its database (steady, now!), and someone else would be making calls for the Little League, or driving the car for the traveling soccer team, or singing in the choir. Ask yourself, if your life's influence were missing, how

much difference would your absence make. Would it be merely incidentals like a name missing from a database, or would there be appreciable holes, the noticeable absence of impact on other lives. If you were to sit down and write your own funeral eulogy this afternoon, would you find enough to say about your influence as a Christian? Put another way, as David Otis Fuller is credited with saying, "If you were accused of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

What imprints of Christ are you leaving? What springs are there because of your life, where once there were deserts?

Now, ask yourself, what measure of gratitude has your life responded with to the grace and magnanimity of our Lord Jesus, both here and in your hope for eternity. And what grace should now flow from *your life* in gratitude, so as to make a beautiful difference.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. *John 3:16*

Amen.