

“Spiritual Law”

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First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, April 6, 2014**

**New Testament Lesson: John 18:28-40
Old Testament lesson: Psalm 132:8-18**

I heard a radio program on my way home from Worship Committee Tuesday night. It's called This American Life and the episode was titled "Bad Baby." Ira Glass, the host, started by asking, "So when does somebody turn bad? When does it happen?"

He's asking whether you can truly be said to be bad when you're 10 or 6 or 2 or 6 months old? To help answer that question, Ira turned to Paul Bloom, a professor at Yale University who does research to understand a baby's sense of right and wrong, good and bad.

It was kind of interesting to hear Bloom make the argument that to a large extent, we start off bad. We start off with powerful selfish impulses. But if you think about babies or ever raised a 2 year old, kind of already knew that. And then what happens, says Bloom, is that mostly through our upbringing, we become good – or not.

What is it that determines if someone is good or not, if someone does what's right or just tries to get by, or worse yet, tries to get over on others? In Our New Testament lesson today we have three different sets of rules being brought to bear on the same situation, that being the arrest of Jesus – three sets of rules that, depending on the rules you live by, will determine whether you act badly or do what is right.

The different sets of rules are 1) religious laws (the Pharisees) (regarding religious-type laws), 2nd) Roman law (Pilate), and 3rd) spiritual laws (as embodied by Jesus). Some of us go through our day following a code of morality set down by the religion or even just the beliefs of our parents. Right is right and wrong is wrong, and that's it – we know which is which because that's what we were told growing up. Our maybe it's a corporate religion, so to speak – following company policy regardless of what's right and what's wrong. Or for young people, doing what your friends do, even when you know better; of course, adults never do that.

And then there are people who use a Pontius Pilate rule of thumb, which is kind of like the Roman law he followed the day Jesus was arrested. Pilate found himself torn between the religious law of the Pharisees and the spiritual law that Jesus embodied. So like many people do today, he tried to walk a safe line in between the two. And in the end, he gets stuck in the middle.

We see this when the Pharisees take Jesus to Pilate, who asks, "What accusation do you bring against this man?" They answer, "If this man were not a criminal, we would not have handed him over to you." Pilate says, "Take him yourselves and judge him according to your law." And the Pharisees says, "We are not permitted to put anyone to death."

You see, Pilate is trapped in the middle between doing what's right in the eyes of God and doing what's best for him in the eyes of society. And so Pilate being Pilate, even though he finds "no case against Jesus," he gives in to the common practices of the day, instead of standing up to the truth of **who Jesus really is**.

Based on the Passover custom, Pilate releases the criminal Barabbas and sends Jesus to be crucified, a man he found innocent. What would cause him to do that?

Well, probably the same thing that causes us to do something wrong in the eyes of God in order to skate by in life, to slip through some sticky spot we've gotten ourselves into or just found ourselves stuck in.

And yet, in such a situation, regardless of any fear, risk or sacrifice we may face, shouldn't our behaviors match our moral and religious values. Of course they should. But all too often, I'm afraid, our actions are more in line with the expectations of our friends, family members or coworkers, and they have little if anything to do with God's will, with God's rule of thumb. We do whatever is cool or whatever makes sense in the eyes of the world, or whatever we need to do to get by in life, even if it isn't the right thing to do.

Take for instance the guy who heard a knock on the door late one night while he and his wife were already in bed asleep. "I'm not getting out of bed at this time," he thinks. Then, a louder knock comes. "Aren't you going to answer that?" asks his wife. So down the stairs he goes only to find a guy who's clearly had a few too many drinks standing at the door. "Hi there," slurs the stranger. "Can you give me a push?" "No, get lost! It's half past three! I was in bed!" screams the man as he slams the door. He goes back and tells his wife what happened. "Tom, that wasn't very nice of you. Remember that night we broke down in the pouring rain and you had to knock at that man's house to get us started again? What would have happened if he'd told us to get lost?" "But the guy was drunk," says the husband. "It doesn't matter," explains the wife. "He needs our help all the more." So the husband gets out of bed again, gets dressed and goes downstairs. He opens the door but can't see the stranger anywhere in the dark. So he shouts, "Hey, do you still want a push?" "Yes, please," cries a voice. "Where are you?" shouts the homeowner. To which the voice comes back, "Over here," "on your swing."

Now that's pushing it. But the point is, when we're tired or cranky, we don't want to be bothered by the needs of others. When our bank accounts are tight, it's

hard to stretch ourselves in giving. When our job or test score is on the line, we're tempted to cheat or to put the blame on others. And whether we do these things or not has to do with which set of laws, which rule of thumb, we follow in life. If we follow the Pontius Pilate Roman law – the rule of thumb that says skate through life as best you can regardless of the truth, regardless of what's right and what's wrong – well, we see where that got him. Pilate was staring truth right in the face, Jesus Christ in the flesh. And all he could say was, "what is truth?" Doing what's right is not about skating through life.

Likewise, if we follow some sort of Pharisee-type religious law – something that just is because that's the way it's always been, well how do they fare in the end? The religious leaders end up being more used by the law than having the law work for them.

John tells us, that because of religious law, "They ... did not enter the headquarters (of Pilate) so as to avoid ritual defilement and to be able to eat the Passover." Well, they got the Passover all right – they ended up sacrificing Jesus for their sin; because of their sinful, misguided ways. And while God was and is ready to turn that to our benefit, I sure would not want to be the one to crucify Jesus. ***Doing what's right is not about holding the line at all costs.*** And yet, we do that. We still crucify Jesus everyday by turning our back on the spiritual laws that he embodied in order to follow the system as it's been established and implemented.

Sometimes we do this out of ignorance, and sometimes we do this out of convenience, and sometimes out of self-protection. But whatever reason you or I have for doing what we know is wrong, the result is the same. Jesus weeps. And more tragically, every time we turn our backs on Jesus, Jesus dies, a little bit, in our hearts.

Better to follow the spiritual laws that Jesus embodied at all costs, because while this may not be the easiest way to go and certainly not the safest, it is clearly the best way when it comes to our relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves.

Standing up to fear and risk, and suffering in Christ-like sacrifice – it's just a part of living in this world for those who follow Jesus. We can either conform to the world or we can conform to Christ. We can't do both.

In fact, Jesus says this in our reading for today, where he says, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over"

According to Jesus, there was a time when the faithful knew so well the truth of his words and the wisdom of his heart that they were actually willing to let him go to the cross without a fight, if it be God's will.

Part of them wanted to fight, part of them wanted to keep him in the world, but a higher part of them knew that the world is not worth keeping if it means giving up on God.

If you are looking for something to write down this week – something to take with you – there’s a spiritual law for you: ***The world is not worth keeping if it means giving up on God.***

That’s what the early followers of Jesus teach us. Because of their faith, and the faith of those who came after them, and the faith of those who touched our lives and passed that faith on to us, we have every reason to stand with God today over and against the world we find ourselves in.

As you approach the cross this Easter – as the spirit of Easter enters into your heart and begins to shape your mind, your thinking, your choices – let it be fear that gets left at the foot of the cross. Let us rise above any risk that gets in the way of our doing God’s will. And let us – you and me – pledge our lives as a fitting sacrifice for Jesus. Amen.

Pastoral prayer

We come with thanksgiving to this place of prayer, O God.

We offer our gratitude for the blessings of this day and especially for the meal which you have prepared for us.

As we feast together, loving God, let us bring to your table the troubles that weigh us down – whatever it is that prevents us from being wholly present.

Let us bring to your table the problems that perplex us, those that prevent us from being open to your creative Spirit.

Let us bring to the table any sorrow that seals us in hopelessness – especially our grief over loved ones who have died – as well as any fears that prevent us from seeing your promise of new life.

Grant us the courage to leave our burdens with you and walk boldly from the table in the fullness of faith.

As Christ transformed death into life, so might we be transformed when later this morning we partake of this holy meal.

And for now, O Lord, be with us in prayer, also, as we lift our eyes toward heaven and our voices in song, praying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.**

**And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**