

# Guest Sermon

## LAW AND GOSPEL

Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

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In these two passages we see one of the tensions of the Christian life. We may think of it as Old Testament versus New Testament, or Jew versus Christian, but it is really a tension within the Christian life and faith. Deuteronomy, from the Bible that Jesus knew, what we call the Old Testament, talks about keeping the commands of God, making sure we do what is right and good, teaching our children and grandchildren what is right and good. That is a big part of what religion, what Christian faith means to us, one aspect of the life of the Spirit. But we often experience that this side of faith does not work. We find it hard to keep the commandments. And we find our children do not hear, or do not learn, or do not follow. And we feel frustration, guilt, failure.

Alongside Deuteronomy is today's Gospel, about Jesus and his disciples not following the Jewish customs about washing hands before meals, Jewish customs rooted in the Old Testament. (This is not about hygiene, washing away germs, but about religious ritual, comparable to saying grace before we eat.) Jesus seems to throw out the commands, the rules of right and wrong that the Jews lived by. But he really is asking his followers to be concerned about purity and cleanness in another dimension: not what is outside but what is inside.

Is Jesus really throwing out the idea of keeping the law, the commands of God? Is he telling us to do as we please? Jesus himself kept most the customs of his days. He went to the temple, he celebrated the Jewish holy days, he preached in village synagogues, he knew the Old Testament through and through. So what was Jesus up to in today's story from the Gospel of Mark? Why does Mark tell us this story from the life of Jesus?

First, Jesus is telling his disciples—and us—that we need to sort out what is important and what is not, what is most essential to live and pass on to our children. Mainline churches like Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, and, to a lesser extent, Moravian, have seen significant losses in membership in the last thirty years. Robert Wuthnow, a leading American sociologist says that this is because we have “failed to teach a clear, compelling set of religious beliefs.” In the first quarter of this century one of the leading concerns of the churches was observance of the Sabbath, or, more properly, Sunday. Now I believe the Sabbath has much to teach us today. (The heart of Sabbath is the conviction of the Jews that they were no longer slaves in Egypt, whose value was only the work they could do for their Egyptian taskmasters. They were people who were valuable because God considered them valuable. In a society where some people die soon after they retire because their life is all work; people who lose their jobs find their lives falling apart; and people who cannot support themselves financially are often viewed as inferior, we need the message of the Sabbath.) But if today the church made the keeping of the Sabbath the heart of our message, we would be driving people away.

When we ask what is the center of our message, we need to remember that it is Jesus Christ. The Bible before me is a big, thick book, but the heart of it is Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—the story of Jesus. In many churches, like the Lutheran and Catholic, the congregation stands when the Gospel lesson is read, a sign of its importance for us. We are neither Unitarians, who believe we can believe whatever we feel like, nor more conservative Christians who think that they can neatly box up what to believe or do. Rather, we believe in a way of life that centers in Jesus Christ.

Especially in the days since September 11, many voices in our culture are saying that religion is the cause of the world's conflicts and that we need to downplay the distinctive elements of religious tradition, like Jesus and Mohammed and Buddha, and stress what we have in common, like a vague belief in God. Without in any way denying the value of working with other faiths for peace and the common good, I believe that in Jesus we have a special, unique message about God and our relationship to God that the world needs to hear. In Jesus we see a God who does not try to overpower humanity but who give up power to live alongside us; a God who shows himself as a servant; a God who lets himself be crucified to show his love for us. This is a story of God the world needs to hear.

Some eighty-five years ago a longtime leader of the Southern Province, J. Kenneth Pfohl, later elected a bishop, wrote this: To the Moravian Church "*Christ is all.*" We speak of the church as "a Christ-centered church," a church which centers *all* on him. And we mean it very literally. We mean it with a positiveness difficult to sufficiently make clear. We mean it so certainly that we make Christ and Christ alone our creed. We are not a creedless church, but we are a church of a single creed—"Christ and him crucified remain our confession of faith." We seek to make him our all in all, the one great essential, the one thing needful...

It has never been the desire of the Moravian Church to add another creed to the many creeds of Christendom. We have considered that there were too many already. Our effort has been to unify them around the one essential fact of Christian faith, that is, a crucified Savior. So we have become a church of a single faith. If, for example, a brother comes to us saying, "Your forms of worship, your liturgies, your hymns and music are not like others," we answer, "That is not material. To be found in faith in Jesus Christ is the essential thing..."

Or let it be question of the mode of baptism, the view of the Holy Communion, the right or wrong of some social practice or individual form of amusement. The Moravian Church would say, "Makes Jesus Christ your Lord and Master, seek the guidance of the Word and his Spirit, and we shall have no differences with you. We offer you in all sincerity our Christian fellowship. We call you ['sister'] and 'brother.'"

Jesus is telling his disciples—and us—to determine what is most important, most essential in our message. Secondly, he is preparing his disciples to go to people who are Gentiles, not Jews, people who are different from them. In the first verse after our Gospel reading for this morning, Jesus goes on his only trip—as an adult; we are not counting his flight as an infant to Egypt—out of Israel, to what is now southern Lebanon. Here the message will be a little different. Here the keeping of the Sabbath will not be important, indeed, may stand in the way of their mission work.

In the Gospels, Jesus is usually called Messiah or Son of Man, terms from Jewish tradition and the Old Testament. But the rest of the New Testament shows Christians talking about Jesus in other ways to people who are not Jews and do not know the Jewish scriptures we call the Old Testament. In Athens Paul sees an altar to an unknown God and says, “I’m here to tell you about this unknown God.” To Ephesians he writes that the central message of Jesus is that Jews and Gentiles are now together as God’s chosen people, that the wall between them has been torn down by Jesus. In Revelation we read that Jesus is the Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of (shown here on the flower stands at Fairview), the A and Z, the beginning and the end. The history of Christian faith is a history of taking the story of Jesus to different cultures, confident that he has a message for every culture. Muslims believe the Quran can be really understood only in Arabic. Christians have worked to translate the Bible into every language people speak, because Christians are always reaching out to those who are different from themselves.

So we have the Southern Province calling Robert Wolfe to do prison ministry here in Winston-Salem. We have Sunnyside Ministry helping those in Winston-Salem with financial limitations. We have the beginnings of ministry among Spanish-speaking persons in Winston-Salem—all different groups with whom God calls us to share the gospel.

May Fairview be a community that knows Jesus Christ is the most important thing, the essential, that asks what tasks Jesus wants us to be about, and that is always seeking to reach new people with the wonderful message of Jesus.