

Jeremiah 31:31-37

Second in a Series on Understanding the Law  
A Communion Meditation Preached

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by

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Moses faced a crucial decision once the Israelites were relatively safe of foreign harassment, and that was the question of how to arrange the social order without the reality of external dangers to keep everyone together. One possibility would be the totalitarian way and the other the way of anarchy. Moses himself and his immediate circle would come out satisfactorily either way but the fate of social whole is quite a different matter. At just this moment Moses is given the Ten Commandments. Think for a moment what comes with the law: this replacement of the vertical pyramid of power with the horizontal society under law. First of all, equality between men is the result of the existence of law. Without law the rights and worth of individual men is determined by their connection with power. Secondly, the law brings freedom. It affirms the right of a man to have living space within which to freely move and live and have his being. Without law freedom only exists for those who possess power. Thirdly, the law brings obligation and with obligation, guilt as men are forced to face up to the boundaries of living. This third gift of the law is not as popular as the first and second and its demands upon us are the reason for the "love-hate" feeling we instinctively have toward law.

Today I want to consider two major questions: (1) Do we need to obey the law - should it be enforced upon us? And, (2) is law and order enough?

The answer to the first question is yes because if law (even civil laws) are turned into a museum relic then other power formations will move in to occupy the vacuum that has been created. Here in the Philippines we have heard a lot about the "Huk justice" of Central Luzon, by which farmers turn for help to Huk prosecutors because the constitutional, legal possibilities of justice have been emptied of real meaning in their eyes. Just this past week, I read a speech delivered on April 27 by the cartoonist Al Capp. The speech is flawed in many ways because of his own cleverness and bitterness but nevertheless he makes one very important point that I think deserves attention. He is a Cambridge resident and in his speech he attempts to trace the decline of law at Harvard University. He says it all started on a day when Robert McNamara visited Harvard.

"We saw it begin a couple of years ago when Secretary of Defense McNamara was invited to speak at Harvard. Now, it is true that McNamara was a member of a despised minority group, the President's Cabinet, but under the law, he had the same rights as Mark Rudd. Harvard's Students for a Democratic Society howled obscenities at McNamara until he could not be heard.

He attempted to leave the campus. The SDS stopped his car, milled around it, tried to tip it over. McNamara left the car. The SDS began to club him on the head with the poles on which their peace posters were nailed. If it hadn't been for the arrival of the Cambridge police, who formed a protective cordon around McNamara and escorted him through a series of interconnecting cellars of university buildings



to safety, he might have been killed.

The next morning, Dean Monro was asked if he would punish the SDS. And he said -- and if you want to know where the malignancy started that has made a basket case of Harvard, it started with this-- Dean Monro said that he saw no reason to punish students for what was purely a political activity. Now, if depriving a man of his freedom to speak, if depriving him of his freedom to move, if damn nearly depriving him of his life-- if that's political activity, then rape is a social event and sticking up a gas station is a financial transaction."

Put the shoe on if it fits! If we discard the law because of fear, anger or desire then how in the world do we propose to keep equality and freedom alive in our society?

But the second question is even deeper. Is law and the order that it promotes enough? The answer to this question is no, because by its nature the law is a boundary, a plumb line, a mirror, an indellible mark and all of these images describe the fact that law is rigid, practically immovable, static. It is vital that justice be rigid in order to be fair; it must not be capable of political influence or bribery, but law alone for this very reason is not an adequate resource for man to meet the kind of challenges that face us if we really are willing to see them. Law alone may tend to encourage us to live behind it, in a minimal sense, so that we surround our lives with a high consciousness of legal requirements but little else. This is a static solution to dynamic problems. No, if human problems are to be solved then much more than law and law enforcement will be needed. For example, in a family it is not relevant to the real needs of a family to live by rules and regulations alone; parents cannot solve the day to day issues that emerge as children grow up simply by quoting and enforcing laws and boundaries; interpersonal encounter, love that goes the second mile along with discipline, is needed.

Our Lord Jesus Christ states the whole matter dramatically in the Sermon on the Mount. He calls to his disciples to exceed the law's requirements.

"Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."

-- Matthew 5: 17-20

We cannot match the problems of our generation without this sort of excess; we must want equality and freedom not only for ourselves but also for our neighbors as much as for ourselves. Do you want to know why a lot of people do not believe us when we give our speeches about "law and order?" It is because they suspect that we want law and the order of law enforcement to protect our own achievements and our own social, financial gains but we are not in the least degree interested in the expanse of equality and freedom beyond our doors. This kind of love of law is superficial and everyone knows it. It is the chief flaw of legalism and because of this basic weakness, Paul reminds us that there is



no law that can make a man alive. We need motivation, a motive source within our character which will desire the spread of the Divine view of man that is revealed in the law. The prophets of the Old Testament saw this clearly and their longing for that gift is at the very heart of the messianic prophecy of the Old Testament. Jeremiah put it this way:

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. Thus says the Lord, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar - the Lord of hosts in his name: If this fixed order departs from before me, says the Lord, then shall the descendants of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever. Thus says the Lord: 'If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the descendants of Israel for all that they have done, says the Lord.'"

-- Jeremiah 31: 31-37

We men today need the power of the Lawgiver at work and in force within our individual lives. This is the gift of the Gospel and the Holy Communion is the sign of that New Covenant. Jesus washes his disciples' feet and then having done something for them (beyond legal requirements) he challenges them to do likewise. Jesus gives bread and wine to them; He gives himself in our behalf; and this holy gift within us is the gift that motivates and empowers us to live creatively as Christ's servants in the world, to fulfill the law.