**You are the ~~Law~~ Light of the World**

(Isaiah 49:1-6; Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23)

*sam andri*

Friends, it is such a delight to be here and to worship together with you at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Grenfell. We’re grateful that for the past 10 weeks, we’ve been hosted so warmly by churches within the Synod of Saskatchewan. During those 10 weeks, we’ve had the privilege to be mentored by several wonderful people including Dr. Jo who’s here with us this morning. Although it’s just online now, we really hope that we could someday meet you all in person.

*Let us pray: Our God, in this moment of prayer, we ask for your grace. We ask that you give us attentive ears and hearts so that we could be good hearers and doers of Your Word. Help us to be better lovers of You and Your Word and Your people. Amen.*

About 10 years ago, I had the privilege to visit Israel. It was such an unforgettable experience. The place, the people, the culture, the history, it’s all just amazing. If God gives you the opportunity to visit Israel, please go. It’s true that once you’ve been to Israel, it’ll somehow change the way you read the Scripture.

Now, today’s gospel lectionary reading reminds me of something that I learned from that particular trip. There was one morning, I got out of my hotel room on the 9th floor and I wanted to get breakfast on the ground floor. So, I took the elevator. Pressed “down” button. And there I got really confused….. because somehow the elevator went up (instead of down), and not only that, it also stopped on every single floor until it finally reached the top of the hotel building and then it went down….but again, it stopped on each floor until it finally reached the ground floor. It took such a long time for me to reach the ground floor.

So I informed the concierge about what I thought was a mechanical issue. Yet, she just smiled and told me that there’s actually no mechanical issue at all. She explained to me that *that* day was a Shabbat day and the elevator was pre-set to stop on every single floor so that Jewish people who observe the Jewish Law would not break the Law. This is because, on the day of Shabbat, they’re prohibited to activate any electrical thing, including pressing the elevator button.

Of course, at that time, I thought to myself, “Wow, what a ridiculous thing!”

But then I had a conversation with my Jewish tour guide about this…. In that conversation, he told me something about what our Jewish brothers and sisters often called “the fences around the Torah,” which I think is really helpful in understanding our gospel reading today.

As we all know, our Jewish friends **faithfully** observe the Law or the Torah (it’s often described as God-given Do’s and Don’ts for Jewish people). It may be hard for us as modern, non-Jewish people to understand it, especially, because many of the rules seem to be impractical and just completely odd. Yet, for them, they faithfully do it because they wholeheartedly believe that God loves them; God wants the best for them; and therefore, God would not give commandments/Laws, which do not ultimately benefit His children.

In fact, for our Jewish brothers and sisters, the Law is the proof of God’s great faith in their ancestors that He entrusted them with the creation of a community that would become the “light for the nations.” (Isaiah 42)

You see here that the Law was given not to make life harder but rather as an expression of God’s trust for His people to protect all the good things that God has given for them and through them…. And therefore, they gladly follow it.

Those of you who are parents/grandparents might be able to relate to this. Parents often must set boundaries and even say No to certain things, which little children often disagree with. They set boundaries or rules because they love their children and want to protect them from any harm or bad influences. Parents hope that through those boundaries and rules, one day the children would be shaped to become good people and ultimately they become blessings for the world….. From the perspective of the little children, those rules may not make any sense, but if the children fully trust their parents, they would usually do it anyway even though with lots of grumbles.

Likewise, our Jewish brothers and sisters really understand the goodness of the Law/Torah. They know that it’s given by God for their good—so that they could become blessings for all. So, they faithfully trust God by following this God-given Law (though sometimes they don’t understand why).

Now, to make sure that they don’t trespass God’s Law, Jewish religious leaders often created another layer of so-called laws/traditions, which are often called “Fences around the Torah”. This is what our Gospel reading today called “the tradition of the elders.” It’s the laws that were created to protect the Law.

For example, if the Torah says that they cannot eat foods that are not Kosher, fences around the Torah would even go further by commanding them not to eat with plates/bowls/utensils, which previously have been used to eat not-Kosher foods. They want to make sure that they won’t, somehow, by accident, violate this God-given law. Or another example, on Shabbat day or the day of Resting, the Jewish people are not supposed to spend money, but to keep them from transgressing the prohibition, the fences around the Torah says that they can’t even touch money (or debit card, I guess) on Shabbat. This is what happened with my experience with the Shabbat elevator as well.

Friends, you see here that the Law is good for it protects what’s inside; it protects what truly matters; it protects the good things that God has entrusted to God’s people…… the “fences of the Law/Torah” is good too because the intention is noble; it’s to double protect what they treasured. As humans, we always want to protect and safeguard what we love…

Yet, as you can see again and again in the Bible, the Law—as well as the fences that humans created around it—could become problematic if we forget why it’s there in the first place. Remember that God gave His people **the Law** so that they could be **the Light** for the nations; so that they could be a blessing **for all**…

Yet when we lose sight of why the Law is there in the first place, we then use it not just to protect what's inside, instead, we use it primarily to keep out whatever's outside… it divides… it creates distance… It defeats its true purpose, which is to be the light for all…. (we put the light under a bowl)

In the Gospel reading today, Jesus wasn’t against the Law (remember Jesus said, I come not to abolish the Law, but to protect it)……. Jesus also wasn’t against the tradition of the elders/the fences of the Torah (remember Jesus said that unless our righteousness surpasses the Pharisees, we’re not worthy to enter God’s Kingdom.)….

What Jesus was against, again and again, is when the Law is exalted to become the boundary marker that divides us and them …. When they lived it as if it’s their primary identity…..when our identity is no longer defined by the very thing that the Law protects, but rather by the Law itself……..Remember this: ***we’re supposed to be the Light of the world and not the Law of the world.***

Likewise, the Pharisees hated Jesus and his disciples not simply because they failed to wash their hands and failed to observe the Law, but rather because Jesus and his disciples seemed to undermine what they thought was their primary identity…. By breaking the Law, the Pharisees thought that Jesus and the disciples threatened their perceived identity: their Jewishness…..

But they missed the point, *just as we often do*….

Because it’s not the Law that defines us as God’s people….. What defines us is the very thing that’s protected by the Law: we are the people who are called to be the light for the nations…… to be the warm that embraces all people….. to be the living proof and invitation of God’s love for all…..

This is why when Jesus was asked by one of the experts of the Law, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus answered, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”…….. This is what’s supposed to define us as God’s people.

Today, what do we think defines our identity as Christians? As Presbyterians?

What is it that makes us Christians? Perhaps, we may think that certain practices, activities, songs, beliefs, theology, moral laws and decisions define us as God’s people…. Yet all those too could become problematic because those things will eventually divide us (rather than unite us)….

Yes, orthodoxy (right teaching) and orthopraxy (right practice) is important. They’re important because they formed us to become better people of God. They prepared us to be witnesses of God’s love.

But the goal of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, at the end of the day, is not for its own sake…….. it is for doxology (worship), which is our desire, praise, and worship to God…. We are all created to enjoy; to desire; to worship; to love God…. This is our only calling and identity….

And here’s the thing: the only way we could desire and love and worship and serve God is through loving, desiring, and serving others. This is why Jesus says that to love others as ourselves is **equally important** with loving God…. For how else could we express our love to God whom we cannot see other than by loving those whom God loves too? (1 John 4:20)

Now to love someone as yourself means to move beyond the subject-object dichotomy. It’s easy to love other people as 'the others' (for example, because they are nice, kind, can be used, etc.). But to love others as "MYSELF" means that I need to really love them just as they love themselves without the need (from my part) to change them prior to loving them…. Yes, of course we often hope that someone would “change” for the better….. but that “change” cannot be the foundation for your love…. God loves us and be gracious to us not because we are so obedient to the Law, but simply because God loves us….

That’s why the moment when we no longer remember this ultimate identity; the moment when we no longer remember that we are called to be the Light, not the Law, of the world, we will then use orthodoxy and orthopraxy (the Law) to shoo others away. We will use it to reject those who don’t think like us, who don’t practice what we believe, who don’t agree with us…. We cast them off in the name of purity… in the name of our identity….

Isn’t this the root not only for division but also colonization? When we focus on our idea of truth and righteousness but forgetting to love others **as we love ourselves**. We force people to be like us…. The result is that no longer do we strive to become the light of the world, but we become the Law of the world….

Yet, today, we’re reminded that while Jesus came not to abolish the Law, He goes beyond that, He came to take us back to the heart of the matter,… He came to create in us the heart that loves God and loves other people as ourselves…. We are called to be the light of the nations…. We are called to be the warmth that embraces all with God’s love and grace….

Yes, it’s risky….

Yes, it may destabilize what we’ve been believing all this while….

Yes, it may even undermine what we thought as our identity….

But just as God—in Jesus Christ— came to this world as human…. Putting away God’s divine nature….. for the sake of showing His love for all…. We too are called **to do** the same to others…

Just as God dealt with us not ONLY with truth and justice but also with love and grace that surpasses truth and justice….We too are called **to do** the same to others….

Just as God accepted and included us even while we were still sinners….. We too are called **to do** the same to others, especially since we too are sinners….

Just as God, in Jesus Christ, came to be the Light of the world that shines forth and gives life and embraces all people... We too are continuously called **to be** the same….

For our Lord, Jesus Chris, on the Cross has accomplished and fulfilled the Law for us….For in Jesus Christ, we are justified not because of the Law and our obedience to it but because of Christ’s perfect fulfillment of the Law on the Cross…..

So, love our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind…… and love others as we love ourselves……For we are God’s people, who are called not to be the Law of the world, but to be the Light of the world… …shining, warming, and embracing everything that God loves…..

May it be so. Amen.