

Rev. Lisa Schrott

September 10, 2023

Psalm 119:33-40 & Romans 13:8-10

Study That Seeks to Understand God: Love as Fulfillment of the Law

Worship. Study. Serve. Care. Invite. Welcome. Build. Heal. The actions we are called to in the Mission Statement here at PCO flow from our belief that in all things, and at all times, we belong to God. Our sure and certain knowledge of this belonging opens our hearts, our arms and our voices to be Christ's hands and feet on earth. This belonging gives us both our marching orders and our wings to fly.

Worship this fall will be oriented around our Mission Statement. We will delve more deeply, seeking a deeper understanding of where and how we are being called to serve God as we move into our 60th year and beyond. The scriptures this fall comes from the Revised Common Lectionary. This is a three-year cycle of Old and New Testament texts that is used across many Protestant denominations, and to some extent, parallels the scriptures used in the Roman Catholic missal. If your Sunday afternoons are spent watching a variety of church services rather than football, you are likely to hear sermons on these texts from other churches. This morning we hear first from a portion of Psalm 119, followed by bit of Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 13. Hear now these words from the Psalmist:

Psalm 119:33-40

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end.
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.
Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it.
Turn my heart to your decrees and not to selfish gain.
Turn my eyes from looking at vanities; be gracious to me according to your word.
Confirm to your servant your promise, which is for those who fear you.
Turn away the disgrace that I dread, for your ordinances are good.
See, I have longed for your precepts; in your righteousness be gracious to me.

Romans 13:8-10

Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

You may be familiar with the scene from the 1981 film *A History of the World: Part 1*. Mel Brooks playing Moses comes down from Mount Sinai carrying three tablets containing 15 commandments, only to drop one of the tablets, losing the last five commandments as the tablet shatters into bits. Have you wondered what was on that third tablet? Well thanks to high definition TV and the pause button, some smart folks at the website Jewish Humor Central¹ have translated the Hebrew on those tablets. The best guesses for the missing the five commandments are:

¹ <http://www.jewishhumorcentral.com/2013/05/found-at-last-mel-brooks-lost-five.html>

11. You shall not pass.
12. You shall not make people laugh or you shall not laugh.
13. You shall not buy.
14. You shall not stay.
15. You shall not break.

So next time you are playing Bible trivia and the question comes up as to which commandment the Israelites defied first, you will know that the correct answer is not the first or second commandment: you shall have no other gods before me and you shall not make for yourself an idol. Rather it is commandment 15 that is first violated: “You shall not break.”

Now lest someone blame me for their loss on Final Jeopardy next week, Moses received ten statutes on two tablets setting out boundaries for living a life in community – in community with the Lord God, and in community with their Hebrew siblings. We first hear of these commandments or laws in the book of Exodus. They are often referred to as the “decatalogue” or the “10 words.” We hear them again, with slightly different language and emphases in the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy. And references to them, along with other laws laid down in the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, are sprinkled throughout scripture. And as we heard both in our Old and New Testament passages this morning, these statutes – the law – is not seen as a burden, not seen as something impinging on the people’s freedom. Rather the law is a source of joy and an expression of love. The psalmist says:

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end.
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.
Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it.

Psalm 119 is a favorite psalm amongst Old Testament scholars. It is the longest of the Psalms, a didactic or teaching psalm. It is an acrostic psalm, each of the 22 stanzas of 8 verses begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet Aleph, Bet, Gimel ... A is for... B is for... C is for... Our passage this morning is from the fifth letter “He”, with each line in the stanza beginning with that letter.”²

In a world where the oral tradition was paramount, think of the generations who learned the importance, the value, and the beauty of the law through recitation of this psalm. It is a purposeful and comprehensive statement of a “torah-oriented life” as Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman denotes, adding that the structure of the alphabetic form, “affirms that the torah will cover every facet of human existence, everything from A to Z. The message is that life is reliable and utterly symmetrical when the torah is honored. ... A torah-ordered life is as safe, predictable and complete as the movement of the psalm.”³ The psalmist says:

Teach me, O Lord, the way of your statutes, and I will observe it to the end.
Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart.
Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it.

Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. When we think of the “law”, of the commandments, delight is not usually the first word that pops into people’s minds.

² Accordance Bible Software v. 13.3.4. OakTree Software Inc. October 2022 update.

³ Walter Brueggemann. *The Message of the Psalms. A Theological Commentary*. Augsburg Publishing House. 1984. p40.

Instead we often think of pointing fingers saying “thou shall not...” However, Brueggemann highlights that teachers of this psalm do not worry about this being legalistic and restrictive, rather that the law reflects some basic life commitments of a people who know to whom they belong.

As members of The Presbyterian Church of Okemos, We believe that in life, in death, and life beyond death, We belong to God.

Brueggeman ends his commentary on this psalm by reminding us that study of the torah is not the end of the story. Instead it is a point of entry for our relationship with God; it is an access point to communion with God, to delighting in God.⁴

This theme of joy, delight, living in love and longing is repeated throughout the 176 verses. Old Testament scholar Bill Brown remarks that Psalm 119 is a poem of “uncompromising zeal expressed with passionate words of petition, thanksgiving and praise. Indeed the speaker represents a composite of voices reflecting different stages in life, from youth to full maturity, all united by a passion for the torah,” with the verb for love occurring 12 times in this psalm.⁵

Paul says to the church in Rome:
Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

The apostle Paul spent much of his writing to the Romans (as well as other churches) putting the law of the Jewish faith into the context of the understanding of salvation by grace through faith in Christ Jesus. As we learn in the book of Acts, Paul was a devout Jew, a member of the Pharisee sect. Paul believed that upholding the Jewish law was a holy practice for the Hebrew people who were also followers of Jesus. Yet, Paul recognized that through the death and resurrection of Christ, the law had been fulfilled. Paul’s writing can often be dense and hard to interpret, but here in the 13th chapter of Romans, Paul is succinct and direct.

Owe no one anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not murder; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Fulfilling of the law through love is our call as Christians. Love does no wrong to a neighbor, whether that is our neighbor next door or our neighbor across the globe. Dr. Miroslav Volf, a Professor of Systematic Theology and the director of the Center for Faith and Culture at Yale University, studies the intersection of the life of faith with our life in the public sphere. He says, “The relationship to what is outside [the Christian faith] should be governed by love. “For God so loved the world” ... and sent Jesus Christ into the world to save it. Similarly the followers of Jesus Christ are sent into this world as he was sent, to love friends and enemies, co-religionists and infidels, and to rejoice in everything that is true, good, and beautiful wherever they encounter it.”⁶

⁴ *ibid* p41.

⁵ William P. Brown. *Deep Calls to Deep. The Psalms in Dialogue and Disruption*. Abingdon Press. 2021. p198-199

⁶ Miroslav Volf. *A Public Faith. How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*. Brazos Press. 2011. p95-96

To rejoice in everything that is true, good, and beautiful wherever we encounter it sounds a lot like psalmist's teaching on the torah. To love friends and enemies sounds a lot like Paul's words to the church in Rome. How do we work towards these seemingly impossible directives? As we hear in our Mission Statement, it is through a lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ, which includes study that seeks to understand God. I appreciate that the mission statement says a lifelong journey, because this is not something that happens in a single moment. I also appreciate that we are "seekers", recognizing that we will not fully understand God on the earthly side of the kingdom.

When I first began working on this message, I had a bit of a quibble with the term "understand" – that we seek to understand God. I think it might have been a consequence of too many years in the classroom, and a tendency for those of us in the reformed branches of the Protestantism to intellectualize matters of faith. And yet the term "understand" does have deeper connotations. And it is in that frame that I feel more comfortable embracing it as part of our collective life. It was actually Wikipedia that provided the key for me, noting that "understanding" involves relationship. Wikipedia includes this language: "Understanding is a relation between the knower and an object of understanding." It goes on to distinguish between knowledge and understanding, relating, "It has been suggested that knowledge alone has little value whereas knowing something in context is understanding... We can have understanding while lacking corresponding knowledge and have knowledge while lacking the corresponding understanding."⁷

It is this last statement that helps me the most as I ponder a lifelong journey of faith. The study of scripture, theological commentaries, and the work of scholars is necessary to give us knowledge of God. And yet it is not sufficient to give us an understanding of God. The understanding of God – the God who claims us as children -comes through a life a prayer and it comes through our lived experience. This lived experience includes our shared life together – the celebrations of births and deaths, the banter around birthdays and football victories (and losses), the shared meal, the greeting on a hard day – they all help us see that we don't walk this journey of life alone. To paraphrase Paul, we show up for each other; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

This lived experience also includes the way we serve others in this world – not from a place of superiority or problem solving. Rather we serve from a place of humility and compassion. We recognize that serving a neighbor in need is serving Christ. I hope you will stay after our service this morning to hear from youth who served our neighbors in Chicago this summer, who lived out Paul's words: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Fulfilling the law through love is a culmination of all we are asked to be in Jesus Christ. It is the process and the product of a lifelong journey of faith that is life in Jesus Christ. Study that seeks to understand God is an inward directed journey and it is deeply personal. Study that seeks to understand God is also an outward directed journey that is deeply relational. It extends from our core belief that we belong to God, and it is in that embrace of love in which we are called to engage with the whole of creation. Amen.

⁷ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Understanding>