

FONTHILL UNITED CHURCH – Scripture & Sermon
Sunday October 4, 2020 - 18th Sunday after Pentecost

WORSHIP FOCUS: Law & Order

It is more important that innocence be protected than it is that guilt be punished, for guilt and crimes are so frequent in this world that they cannot all be punished.

But if innocence itself is brought to the bar and condemned, perhaps to die, then the citizen will say, “whether I do good or whether I do evil is immaterial, for innocence itself is no protection,” and if such an idea as that were to take hold in the mind of the citizen that would be the end of security whatsoever. ~ John Adams

1st LESSON: Psalm 19:7-14 (KJV)

The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward.

Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults.

Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression.

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

2nd LESSON: Exodus 20:1-21 (NRSV)

Then God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die."

Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin."

Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.

REFLECTION: "A Clean Fear"

God's fear is clean, enduring forever.

Our Psalm for today presents us with an arresting image. A clean fear. As a word-construct this idea is a good one. It is poetic. There is nothing hackneyed about it. And, because it is not a commonplace, it makes us think. What exactly is the clean fear that God gives us? And, why would we want to have a clean fear in the first place, let alone any fear?

We will never exactly know the answer to these questions. The Psalmist wrote these words thousands of years ago. We can't ask him or her. And yet, we know, by looking at the context of this Psalm that the clean fear which comes from God has something to do with the law. This word-construct comes at the end of a beautiful passage of poetry extolling God's law:

God's law is perfect, refreshing to the soul; God's instruction is sure, giving wisdom to the simple; God's precepts are right, rejoicing the heart; God's commandment is pure giving light to the eyes; God's fear is clean, enduring forever; God's judgements are true, every one of them righteous; More desirable than gold, even much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey, pure honey from the comb.

The clean fear our Psalm refers to, has something to do with God's law. And, this clean fear also has something to do with purity, truth, the ability to refresh, simpleness, lightness, joy and sweetness.

This gentle, hopeful perspective is not our usual way of thinking about the law. And yet, as I have pondered the idea of a clean fear this week, and tried to understand the Psalmist, I have been reminded of the kind of fear that many children experience in their relationship with their parents, especially when their parents are fair and competent. And I have been wondering if a clean fear is perhaps that secure, non-anxious assurance that children who are raised with loving, reasonable parents have, when expectations are clearly laid out, when the children know what is right, and what is wrong, and when they are shown the differing consequences that result from doing right or wrong.

A clean fear is simple and trusting. It has no reason to doubt the love or the truthfulness of the parents who set the rules. It is not suspicious. The rules are applied fairly and equitably, and there is no reason to doubt them. The rules seem just. The punishments reasonable. And, as a result, the clean fear of a child, is able to rejoice in doing what is right, sure of their reward, basking in the love and appreciation of a wise and loving parent.

There is, moreover, something innocent about this clean type of fear. It trusts. It accepts. It obeys. And, it does so willingly because the law that inspires this clean fear make sense.

When I was a boy, for instance, my clean fear involved an amazing trust in the wisdom of my Father. My Father, as far as I was concerned, knew everything. He knew what was right and

what was wrong. For me, he was permeated with a moral authority and prestige. His law was generous, forgiving. His law held me and my brothers and sisters to account. We were all judged the same way, and rewarded the same way. We never doubted this truth, and the resulting trust we felt, and the sense of safety our Father's rules allowed us to grow up experiencing, gave us the freedom we needed to enjoy a childhood that was truly remarkable.

Indeed, I think of my childhood as a kind of idyllic existence, as a kind of Eden, in which the law and protection of my parents kept me safe, secure, valued, heard and loved.

Psychologists have long noted that most healthy adults who were raised with good enough parental attachment have this same deeply embedded sense within them of childhood being a kind of Eden, a blessed pre-fall state of innocence.

And many of you, I know, when I talk with you, have this same kind of *Et in arcadia ego* experience every time you mention your own childhoods. Earlier this week, for instance, one of you took me to a stream down in a hollow that she used to play in as a child. She talked about how she and her friends and siblings could play in that stream for hours without a care in the world. And, as she talked to me about that time, something leaped out of her, deeply buried in her ninety-year-old self that was passionate, direct, winning and electric. She took me to the time, her simpler time, that time when we each had a clean fear, an innocent fear, of what sinning might bring about in our souls, when we were sure that we could keep the law and stay pure, and we, each of us, lived in our own gardens, our own Edens.

You may remember that time, yourself, when everything made sense. And certainly when the rules and the ordering of daily life in our own families make sense, the way we experience God and the way we are taught to understand God's way of ordering the world and setting up expectations for us, is easy. God's law makes sense, and it inspires within us that same clean childlike trusting fear we experience in our families.

Try, for instance, to remember how, as a child, you understood the Ten Commandments, that central moment of God's self-giving revelation to men and women.

Do you remember how you learned the Ten Commandments as a child? Do you remember the simple, trusting way that you read them? Do you remember the way that you accepted them because of the clear way that they corroborated your experience of a world that made sense?

The do not's were certainly clear: You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not lie. You shall not be jealous of another. And certainly, as children, we easily made up some other do not's from the more complicated parts: Don't swear. Don't be mean to grandma and grandpa. Don't skip Sunday school.

Our clean fear made understanding the law, and God's expectations for us, a very different matter from the decidedly messy fear with which we tend to approach God's law as adults. As we grow up, we lose our innocence. And, when this happens, our clean fear becomes sullied, the Law becomes hard, difficult, complicated.

Do you remember when your clean, innocent fear of the Law changed? Do you remember the moment when it became difficult to trust the Law and see the law as just and righteous?

I know that I do.

As a child, Jesus' commandment to love my neighbour as I loved myself made a lot of sense to me. My parents and grandparents seemed to do just this, and, as a result, respect for others just made sense. And yet, as I worked my way up from kindergarten through primary school, it became obvious to me that the laws, the way the teachers and the other students treated each other, had very little to do with equity, respect, or fairness. Wealthy students with helicopter parents were treated with far more respect than the children who 'lived in the apartments.'

Children who were not as bright as others were laughed at. Children who were not as strong or as athletic as others were picked on. Marks, especially good marks, excused terrible social behaviour, as did athletic ability.

During my childhood my neighbourhood welcomed many refugee families from Bangladesh, Chile, and Cambodia. We did not treat these neighbours as ourselves. We had words, ugly words to call them, and teachers who subtly encouraged our injustice.

And then, in a later grade, I lost my innocence. A teacher who in many ways epitomized this mean streak in us, asked me whether I would jump off a bridge to save a classmate drowning in the river below. I know now that she was asking me whether I was foolish enough to follow a fool into danger. But at the time, I remember that I understood the question as being a question about taking care of my neighbour, and, since I was a very good swimmer, I was pretty confident that I could jump off a bridge and save a stranger. I believed that I could be a Good Samaritan.

I still remember as if it were yesterday how that teacher scorned my reply, and encouraged the rest of the class to laugh snidely at my credulous, innocent trust in myself and the importance of goodness.

I still remember how my clean fear in God in an instant was replaced by doubt, shame, suspicion and confusion. My clean, innocent, credulous fear evaporated. It became sullied. I sunk into the muck. Things became murky. My clean fear in the rules of the world and their justice, was shattered by my realization that in the 'real world' things were just not as equitable or as just as they should be.

Do you remember the moment that this happened to you?

The world would say this is a good thing – that up until this moment, we are living with illusions, and that disillusionment is the beginning of wisdom. But I don't think the world is right. The world sounds a lot like the snake in the garden, doesn't it?

We all have an experience in which we leave innocence behind. We leave the garden of delights that is childhood and start to live in the real world, and become dragged down, not because God's rules are bad, but because the world's rules lack the wisdom, the grace and the understanding of the simple rules our parents showed us and that God gives us. The world makes the rules harsh. The world applies the rules inequitably. And, the unjust way that the rules are applied means that we slowly stop trusting the rules.

Keeping the law with a clean fear becomes ridiculous. Indeed, keeping the law becomes silly. We realize that there is no great reward necessarily in store for us if we keep it. We see the law perverted. We see that it is different for white and for racialized people. With each perversion that we notice, we realize that someone who has done wrong has been rewarded.

Without innocence, without laws that protect the innocent, the clear fear of the Lord evaporates. The shepherds and shepherdesses of Arcadia, Sylvain and Dorinda, in our poem by Parnell, become alcoholic dolts, cheats, and sexual predators. They fall. The only thing that retains its innocence is their sheep.

We are living in precisely such a time, a time when whatever vestiges of innocence we have, are quickly being stripped away. Turn on the news and we know we are living in precisely this time: a time when the law is no longer impartial, just, and equitable, when there are no longer any innocents left to rejoice in the garden and taste its honey.

Indeed, we have forgotten the words of John Adams:

It is more important that innocence be protected than it is that guilt be punished, for guilt and crimes are so frequent in this world that they cannot all be punished.

But if innocence itself is brought to the bar and condemned, perhaps to die, then the citizen

will say, “whether I do good or whether I do evil is immaterial, for innocence itself is no protection,” and if such an idea as that were to take hold in the mind of the citizen that would be the end of security whatsoever.

And, what is worse, our failure to create a just and equitable world has caused us to forget God’s law, and to remember that God’s Law is not the same thing as the world’s law.

So what are we to do?

I think we can start by holding God’s law to our hearts, by recalling that trusting clean fear of our childhoods, and realizing that that child in us is still there, ready to leap up high. And we can start by remembering the first commandment, love the Lord your God with all your heart in all its purity, with a clean fear, stripped of all irony.

I think too that we can remember some fundamentals of our faith.

God is not a President. God is not a Prime Minister. God is not a Parliament. God is not an elementary school teacher, minister or thug. God is not a police force or a government justice system. God is not the economy.

God is God.

God did not pervert God’s law. We perverted God’s law.

There is nothing wrong about God.

We may have fallen. But God has not. God can never fall.

There is nothing wrong with God’s law.

Although we may have fallen, there is nothing essentially wrong with you or with me. The innocent child in each of us is nearer than we suspect.

And I think we can remember our scripture. *Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.” Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.*

God is still in the thick darkness.

And, if we can try to approach that thick darkness with a clean fear, admit our helplessness, and our need, and seek God’s love, and guidance, well – that’s a start back along the road to innocence.