

Sermon for Sunday, March 18, 2018 - "Hearts or Laws?"

Fifth Sunday in Lent
March 18, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

Today's scriptures: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

Does change come through legislation or through a focus on hearts and minds? This perpetual question is as relevant today as it's ever been. It's a question asked of Daryl Davis - the black man who's spent years befriending Ku Klux Klan members in hopes of changing their hearts. Daryl was at Luther College last week during the Hope over Hate week - a week that unfortunately ended very painfully with the letters KKK and a swastika stomped into the snow on the college football field. As we've seen so often recently, white supremacy is very much alive and well in this country. How do we stop it?

Daryl Davis has made a profound impact. He reports that over 200 Klansmen have given up their robes and cards as a result of interactions with him. He has a powerful story of making change - one heart at a time. Yet Davis is often criticized for not acknowledging the power of systemic racism in the US.

The Decorah paper this week had an article about how Winneshiek County responded to the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. The Klan was rising in Northeast Iowa, but the county supervisors decided its presence put the safety and free speech of others at risk. So, they banned them from parading through local streets by day or burning crosses in local pastures by night. This ban was successful in countering the Klan.

How will change happen? Attention to laws and systemic issues or attention to hearts and minds? We're asking this question about racial issues, gun control, sexual harassment, the opioid crisis and so many other issues.

These days, many Christians are also wondering what role God's law should play in our religiously diverse, democratic society. What bearing should the Ten Commandments and other ethical teachings in the Old Testament have on our life together today? The ancient purity and holiness codes are bound to a particular time, but what about commands that call us to honor life, family and the neighbor and to care for the poor, for strangers and resident aliens? How do we understand them today and how should they impact our public life?

Some would seek to impose their interpretation of the commands on others. Some think religion should have nothing to do with law - that it should be all about love, all about the heart. Still others see the law guiding us to work for justice and care for others.

Our first reading today is often used to say that religion should be all about the heart. It announces a new covenant given to God's chosen people, and to us through baptism - a covenant that addresses our hearts. So, it would seem, a change of heart is more important than the law. Except God isn't saying here that the law is unimportant or that it will be abolished. Rather, God is saying the law is so essential that it will be

placed within us, and written on our hearts. We will internalize God's teachings. (The Hebrew word used for God's commands also means teaching.)

In the reading from Jeremiah and throughout scripture, we see that God's law is crucially important for us and for our world. It is a key way that God's concern for the well-being of all people is made known. It's intended to help us live in freedom and to know fullness of life in community. God's law is how we live out God's love and God's justice together.

The days are surely coming, says our God, when the law will be written on our hearts and will be within us. Then we won't need to study and ponder God's external teachings.

The days are surely coming but, oh my, we're not there yet! Oh my, do we ever still need God's teachings to lead us into justice, freedom, and well-being for all people. We need to study and ponder them.

We also need their guidance for our life in this society. That's not to say that we as Christians should seek to impose our understandings of God's law on other people in this pluralistic, democratic country. Rather, God's law calls us to engage in our common life with a focus on justice, with a concern for the well-being of others.

In this country, that means advocating for good and just laws that enhance the well-being of all people. It means bringing our voices into the public square, into civil and respectful dialogue for the sake of the larger community. It means discerning with others, including those who hold very different beliefs, about how we can move towards justice and well-being together. As we do all this, we tend to our life together, both through attention to good laws and through conversations that can change hearts and minds.

This is all hard work. We're reluctant to do it, we struggle with it, we fail. As we seek to live out God's law, it shows us how much our hearts need to change, how far we stray from God's ways of love and justice. It would be so much easier if God's intentions for life together were just written on our hearts and everyone else's hearts. The days are surely coming, says our God, when that will happen. Until then we are called to seek, wrestle, discern, risk, and be willing to make mistakes.

We can do all this because of the other key way that God's love is made known in the world - through God's forgiveness.

As the new covenant is announced, we hear that God forgives our iniquities and remembers our sin no more. Then Jesus announces a new covenant made with his blood, given for you and for all people, for the forgiveness of sin. This forgiveness changes our hearts. It allows us to experience God's compassion and mercy so that we can extend it to others. God knows we need compassion and mercy as we work with one another in the public square seeking good laws and changed hearts, especially these days.

So today, and every Sunday, we hear these words of forgiveness and love spoken directly to us: This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people for the forgiveness of sin.

God, let this promise change our hearts and lead us in your ways.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.

