

**A sermon preached by Rev. Jason Cashing at  
Clarence Presbyterian Church on June 2, 2024.**

**KEEPING THE LAW**

**<1 Samuel 3:1-10; Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Mark 2:23-3:6>**

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

“Here I am; you called me...”

Today in worship we are blessed and overjoyed to welcome into church membership four remarkable high school youth. We are not just welcoming them into the membership of Clarence Presbyterian Church, or even just into the membership of the Presbyterian Church (USA), our denomination. We are, in fullness, welcoming them into membership in the church, the communion of faith, which was born out of the teachings, the life, death, and resurrection, and the calling of Jesus. These four individuals are committing their lives to be lives of faith and service, lives of compassion and mercy, lives of celebration and resurrection abundance. They are committing themselves to keeping the law, not of any particular country or government, or of any club or party, but the laws of the Kingdom of God as they have been manifested in the world.

As one confirmand has put it, “I realize that this is just the beginning of my journey as a Christian, and I think joining the church will be a stepping stone into what I hope will be a lifetime of faith. Joining the church is also a way to display my commitment to God and it will express to everyone that I am serious about my religion. I have been going to church throughout my whole life and I have been involved with many different facets of it. I hope to expand what I do in the church, and learn more about God and how we can spread [God’s] message here on Earth.” (*Dylan W.*)

Another confirmand commented, “through the church I hope to be able to interact with people who have diverse perspectives and attitudes, enabling me to deepen my understanding of religion by actively listening and learning from others. Ultimately, joining the church offers me the chance to contribute, connect, and grow in my faith journey.” (*Ian G.*)

“Here I am; you called me...”

It was the Sabbath, and again Jesus was “up to no good,” as some of the religious leaders of the day might have put it. Going through the grain fields, the disciples, being hungry, determined to pick some of the grain to snack on. Of course, being the Sabbath, anything that remotely resembled work was frowned upon and against accepted practice. Intended to help a faithful individual practice the Fourth Commandment, the application had turned into an unthinking “right or wrong” legalistic reality - either you kept the Sabbath by refraining from anything that could be constituted as work, or you didn’t. One practice was correct, the other wasn’t. Picking grains of wheat on the Sabbath, even to keep hunger at bay and keep energy up, was wrong.

Jesus, and the disciples it seems, have no regard for keeping the law. Except that there is a different perspective in Jesus' mind about what constitutes keeping the law, and it is not centered around the legalistic interpretation that has become prevalent. Jesus proclaims that the sabbath is made for humanity, not humanity for the sabbath. In essence, the presence - and even the observance of the sabbath - is intended to support, uphold, and enhance daily, faithful living.

To augment this point, Mark's gospel follows this with another example in which Jesus, again speaking against the common understanding held by the religious leaders, asks, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" It should be a straightforward question, but it goes unanswered, perhaps because the religious leaders know, in their heart of hearts, what the answer ought to be, even if they aren't ready to admit it.

The answer seems to always be, "to save life." Or to enhance life. To build up life. To bring people closer to the reality of resurrection and meaningful, purposeful life. This bedrock interpretation informs all the other laws and practices. And that may look different in different situations, but it maintains a constant foundation: to bring people closer to the Lord of life. Looking at these texts in conversation with a similar occasion in Matthew's gospel, Jesus reminds the religious leaders that he has not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it - in its fullest meaning and purpose. And at its fullest meaning and purpose, the law was intended to help the people draw closer to each other, draw closer to God, and live into life.

"Here I am; you called me..."

One of our confirmands shared of how their family had heard about our church, and our congregation, specifically. "The way [our friends] spoke of this church was not in any sort of a strict or rigorous way we had once known but instead as if it was more of a family which sought out the concept of love and unity. A church which had praised the teachings of Jesus centered around inclusivity and the acceptance of imperfection... The friendship, the kindness, and the acceptance of this church and its followers helped put my family, in what I believe is a better place mentally and physically." (*Brendan S.*)

When I was in seminary down in Austin, TX, I became affiliated with University Presbyterian Church. Located a few short blocks from the seminary, the church was also on the edge of the University of Texas campus. There was a robust ministry to students in this church, both undergraduate and graduate, secular and seminary alike. And for whatever reason, when we students were in church we sat right in the front pew.

Communion each month was always by intinction. As such, the pew with my fellow students and I was the first to go through and receive the elements during communion. And then, having returned to our seats within the first 45 seconds, we would sit and wait in silence.

After the first few months of this, I found that I was drawn more and more to watch the rest of the congregation come through the line for communion. Hearing the ministers

proclaim, over and over, to each next person, “the body of Christ...the blood of Christ,” I truly began to understand that each of these people was a brother or sister in faith. Normally during worship, as I was sitting up front, I couldn’t see who else was behind me in the congregation. But during communion, I was able to watch each person as they came forward, communed at the table set by our Lord, and to realize how deeply connected we are.

And thankfully, the ministers of the congregation already knew that. While it became one of the greatest lessons I learned in seminary, it was a reality already being practiced in that congregation. Any classes or programs offered, any decisions made, any events planned were generally determined by two criteria: “Is this honoring to God,” and “Does this bring life to the people.” If the answer to both was “yes,” then it went full ahead. The calendar of events would shift and change, but the ministry of congregation was always centered around honoring God and enabling life.

“Here I am; you called me...”

One of the confirmands joining the church today wrote, “A big topic discussed during our confirmation meetings was that you can always do more together. The church’s objective is to help and communicate with those all around the world. We have achieved this by volunteering for the 10,000 meals and traveling to Iona.” *(Katie J.)*

In the perspective of Jesus, keeping the law was always dependent on whether the result matched the intent: does this resultant reality reflect the kingdom of God and the closeness, the wholeness, the communion to which we are called? Which God envisions?

“With Jesus, rules are meant to be fulfilled, enlivened, and embodied so that their purposes are experienced. The sabbath rule we find in the ten commandments is about resting from work, yes, but it’s about much more than the work we do to pay our bills and keep a roof over our heads. It’s about teaching us to rest from the things that keep us from God...and to be reminded that we continuously need to be reoriented towards God.” *(Center for Excellence in Preaching, Chelsey Harmon)*

So today we celebrate the joining of four new disciples as they commit to the church of Jesus in faith. They have chosen to take this step toward life. Our calling, as well, is to both be an example of faithful living and to work to aid them in the fullest keeping of the law: that they may be continuously reoriented toward God. That we, as well, may be reoriented toward God. And that the world may be transformed to reflect the Kingdom of God, here and now.

“Here we are; you called us...”. Amen.