

Devotion, Fourth Week after Epiphany, 2023

Rev. Jeanne Simpson

This past Sunday I talked about the Matthew text where Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.” This is a little puzzling, in that Jesus constantly confronts the Pharisees and Jewish authorities throughout the gospels about all their petty little laws, like not gleaning grain on the Sabbath, even when you’re hungry.

What we tend to miss in these discussions about the law is the real meaning of that word to Jesus and the Jewish people. The Hebrew word is “torah,” and it’s used more than 200 times in the Bible. The introduction to Deuteronomy says that it is the “torah” that Moses set before the Israelites, and the text then follows with the Ten Commandments, the Shema (“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord”), and a long list of regulations related to aspects of daily life. A lot of these texts certainly look like legal material. But if we realize that “torah” also means “teaching, instruction,” then the legal language makes a little more sense. The law usually involves criminal activity, but teaching and instruction have to do with everyday life – when to rest (on the Sabbath), not to covet a neighbor’s wife or property, to love God with one’s whole heart and soul, and to honor one’s parents. When we look at the law/Torah in this manner, we see that it is really about ethics and compassion. God loves us and wants us to love him in return. God wants us to love our neighbors and not spend all our time in conflict with them.

The torah is full of emotion and concern for the beloved community. So when Jesus says that he hasn’t come to abolish the torah, but to fulfill it, we can look at his teachings and life and understand how he fulfilled the tenets of these ancient instructions. God wants us to treat others like we want to be treated. God wants us to remember that God is our sovereign Lord who is incredibly patient with our shortcomings. Jesus constantly heals people and tells them not to sin anymore. He doesn’t give up on the least of those around him. He takes the Old Testament instructions for living in community and gives them new, enlarged meaning – where compassion and justice outweigh punishment for sin.

We don’t have to throw out the Old Testament law with Jesus. Jesus shows us how to follow the torah, by his example of mercy and grace. When we do that, we show that God’s kingdom is indeed here, among us, as we follow those teachings.

Jeanne