



June 23, 2019 - Law or Faith?

Given by Rev. Mattei

[Galatians 3:23-29](#)

I picked up a sense of sacred awe and respect for God and all things related to religion early on from my grandparents. I enjoyed the mysticism and responded with curiosity to the calming moments of silent prayer preceding mass and following Holy Communion: what prayers were the adults saying silently? Would they teach them to us, little children? I have memories of my grandma calling me, my siblings and cousins around her to recite the rosary. It was a pain to interrupt our games to endure long prayers. But after a while, I learned to enjoy the repetition of praying the rosary and adding new prayers to my repertoire. I wanted to be good and look good.

In my teenage years, I was part of a very large youth group. During the learning meetings which alternated to game nights, our youth chaplain would teach us the catechism and challenge us to apply the words of Jesus to our life. I have fond memories of those learning nights, especially because they responded to my need for growth and learning. What I did not realize until much later was that I enjoyed spiritual insights for the purpose of having clarity on how to live a holy and righteous life and make progress on my personal project to live an acceptable and respectable life before my peers and my God. I wanted to know what God's plans for me were so I could do everything right. I wanted to be a good Christian, a holy person. I took the Ten Commandments as my guiding principles and a list I needed to check constantly. I made sure I went to all youth group activities, to spiritual retreats, to mass every Sunday and was part of the choir.

One day as I was on a streetcar returning home from school, I recall having a clear insight, a strong sense that God was not simply a divine Being out there making sure that we do all things right; God was *my* God, who wanted a personal relationship with me. God, in other words, stopped being a demanding Stranger and became a Person who desired to be closer to me. How could I say "No" to a God who wanted to keep me around all the time and not see me simply on Wednesday nights or Sunday morning? I set myself up to discover the Will of God *for me*: what was the plan, the blueprint I needed to fulfill? I wanted to please God. However, had I read St. Paul's letter to the Galatians, I would have heard directed to me the question he had for them: "Are you mad?" (see [Gal 3:1](#)) A life of faith does not come about by practicing the Law (i.e. what needs to be done to be found in the right and avoid punishment - note: there is no reward for doing what is right)! People do not need faith to fulfill the Law: they need obedience. Belief in the message produces the necessary faith to receive the Spirit. Then and only *then* will we live by faith a life of righteousness before God and enjoy the "reward" of eternal life (i.e. life in the Trinity *now*).

The purpose of the Law, Paul instructs us, is to keep us on the straight and narrow. Our insanity is to trust that by fulfilling the Law we will gain salvation. It is not rare to hear people boasting to be good simply because they do not kill, steal, and lie. Fool, you are already supposed to do that according to the Law: that does not make you good. It's not about how hard you try, or because you feed the hungry, or because you got baptized and go to church. You are still an outsider and do not enjoy intimacy with God. Grace draws us closer to the heart of God and allows us to dwell in God. We may ask for this Grace in our prayer.

I went to seminary to pursue ordination in the Roman Catholic Church still believing, somewhat in faith, that this was my path. We all are given a vocation that if discovered and pursued will give us plenty of satisfaction and we can do much good to the world. Ordained life *is* my vocation but until I faced a deep faith crisis I would still consider it the Will of God for me, the blueprint in heaven I needed to fulfill to make God happy and to find happiness. During all my seminary years and then into my first years as a priest, I could not find an answer to a persistent question: how could I be faithful to my vow of chastity when I had a strong sexual drive and the desire to have a family? The challenge became even greater and real when I met Stephanie during my seminary years. Was the desire to marry a constant temptation or God's invitation to reconsider the chains I had taken on? Was I being too weak and not capable of persevering or was I misunderstanding what a faithful life means?

It was not until I joined the Lutheran Church that I understood that Grace is not only the God-given power to respond to God's Will but also and above all the free call to live a life in God where personal sacrifices are not necessary: Christ's sacrifice is sufficient and we live free. I felt free to give full expression to my love of Stephanie, receive love, and build a family, and at the same time to fulfill my vocation to ordained ministry. We perceive God's goodness to us and we respond. There is no heavenly blueprint but only the call to trust God moment by moment and make decisions not dictated by our impulsiveness or egoism but enlightened by Wisdom Spirit. The *personal* God is the constant Presence that finds expression in the Love we are able to offer to others and the Life energy that creates new things.

There is no heavenly blueprint designed just for me. The only blueprint is the Christ model into whom we are called to grow. And the call is the everyday call to extend love to neighbor through faith in Christ: this will free us from looking at others from a political, economic or social perspective: when I interact with another person I want to do so from the perspective of a free child of God not chained to my particular opinions but open to engage and listen to the hopes and longings of another child of God beyond external distinctions and conditioning. Through faith by Grace, we all are on equal footing before God and freed to live a life in Christ. The power of the cross is revealed in the readiness to abolish the social constructs that divide us. This freedom allows us to seek the Truth and create new communities where people relate to one another as though they were in the very presence of God.

Although we all (I think) subscribe to the (Nativity) Values statement we print in the back of our bulletin every single Sunday, is there any part of it we can be more intentional in making it

visible? What would Nativity look and sound like if those written values were lifted off the page and became part of our daily reality?

May we be granted a taste of what it is like to be “one in Christ Jesus.”

May the Grace of God give us the power to live free as children of God through faith. Amen.