

The Heart of the Law
Exodus 19:1-9; Matthew 5:17-20

Have you ever thought about how essential the heart is to life itself? If you or someone you love has ever been diagnosed with an issue with their heart, lungs or kidneys I expect you might have thought a little about this critical organ and how it functions. The heart's job is to collect blood from all areas of the body, pump the blood to the lungs where it receives oxygen, collect the oxygen-rich blood from the lungs, and pump it to all areas of the body. Our blood both supplies oxygen from the lungs to the other organs and tissues and removes carbon dioxide to the lungs, where the gas is breathed out. Blood also distributes nourishment from the digestive system and hormones from glands. Likewise our immune system cells travel in the bloodstream, seeking out infection, and blood takes the body's waste products to the kidneys and liver to be sorted out and trashed. One of the things I learned when Bill was ill was how important the heart, lungs and kidneys were to life itself. If something happens to one the others are affected. But friends, the heart is the catalyst. For it is the heart that enables the blood to pump throughout our bodies making the other processes work.

So when we talk about something being the heart of the matter we mean the basic, central, critical point - what really matters. The thing that makes everything else work and make sense. And so today I want us to think about what is the heart of the law. What is at the center of why God gave us the law and what God wants us to understand about the function of the laws God provided.

The Israelites crossed the Red Sea on dry ground and began their journey through the wilderness learning to trust God to provide for their needs. It was not easy. Finally they arrived at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Our minds immediately move to the giving of the law on Mt. Sinai but our

passage today is what happened before the ten commandments and all the laws and statutes found in the Torah were shared with Moses. For here in this passage we discover what lay behind the giving of the law. The reason obeying the law matters. The heart of the law.

And friends, God's first words remind us who God is and how much God loves us. *"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles wings....."* What a powerful image of God - the one who plucked the Israelites out of danger just like an eagle grabs their young with their powerful talons when they are learning to fly and don't succeed carrying them to safety. Did you know that it takes baby eagles a while to learn to fly? As a matter of fact it takes three or four years before their wings reach full plumage. They are dependent on their mother for everything. The mother eagle's role is to protect them and to provide for them until they are ready for bigger and better things. She flutters over her young spreading out their wings as they grow until she believes they are ready to learn to fly. And then she pushes them out of the nest showing them how to fly. It is believed that is why their nest are built high up on the limbs of trees often in remote spots. So they can teach their young to fly with plenty of room to catch them if they fail. God is like that. God cares for us, provides for us, loves us, protects us and is always there to catch us if we fall.

But that's not all God told Moses. God also told Moses why he cares for his people and why he brought them out of Egypt. *"You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles wings and brought you to myself."* Friends, God's intent - the reason God brought them out of danger was to be in relationship with them - a deep and abiding relationship. A relationship that involves living a certain way because of our relationship with a loving, caring, gracious God.

This relationship is built on obeying God's voice and keeping covenant so that they would know that they were a treasured possession out of all the peoples. Friends, the purpose of the law was

to care for, nourish and protect God's most treasured possession. Think about those things you consider treasured possessions. My guess is that for many of us it is not the most expensive thing we ever bought - it's value to the world might seem inexpensive. It might even be something that was given to us and it's value is unknown. But to you it is a treasured possession. Either because of who gave it to you or what it represents or reminds you of. It is treasured because of your relationship to it or your relationship to the one who gave it to you.

Most Sundays I wear a cross around my neck. I wear it because it symbolizes the one I serve who died on the cross and the sacred honor I have to proclaim God's holy words. But it is a treasured possession because it was my mother's cross. A cross that she was given for her years of service as a Director of Christian Education by my home church when she retired. It reminds me of the one who taught me the faith, the one who cared for me every day of my life. The one who nourished me. The one who pushed me out of the nest but was always there to catch me if I fell. The one who not only cared for me but served the broader community and taught me to love others because she loved her Lord with heart, soul, body and strength.

God bore the people of Israel out of Egypt on eagles wings because they were his treasured possession. And God promises to continue to care for them and us so that we will continue to be in relationship with him. But to be in relationship with God requires something from us as well. A relationship is a two way street. It doesn't work unless both sides are working on it. And what God asks for in this relationship is that we become a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.

To be a priestly kingdom means that we are servants of God. The role of the priest was to serve God leading worship and to serve the people as mediators with God. The priests were those who helped others to develop a relationship with God. They pointed out where they saw God at work and

they spent their life helping others to see God's hands and God's desires. From the beginning the priest's role was centered on providing the means for the people of God to draw closer to God. Therefore if we are to be a priestly kingdom then we are to become those whose lives reflect the one we serve and who live in community bringing others into a relationship with God. And that requires that we do more than simply hear and obey God's laws. It requires that we become who God wants us to be. It requires that our hearts beat as one with God's will so that others know that we are God's people - a priestly kingdom set apart for a specific function - to love and care for one another.

And as a holy nation we are also set apart for a specific function - to embody God's purposes to the world. First Peter says it this way: "*you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*" (I Peter 2:9) Behind God's covenant was a desire that God's people would be holy - set apart from all others for a specific function. And to learn how to be holy required a certain lifestyle that demanded a life lived in community in a loving, caring way.

And so to help the Israelites understand what was expected God provided the covenant - the law - on Mt. Sinai. The ten commandments and all the laws and statutes that would shape their life as a holy nation. Remember that these people had been in slavery for hundreds of year. Never had they lived in freedom. They did not know how to be a community of caring, loving people. They needed structure and guidance as they built a new life together so they were prepared for what lay ahead.

In her beautiful novel about the state of Maine, Sara Orne Jewett describes the visit of a woman writer to the home of a retired sea captain. On the pathway leading to his home, she noticed a number of wooden stakes randomly scattered about the property, with no discernible order. Each was painted white and trimmed in yellow, like the captain's house. Curious, she asked him what they meant. He told

her that when he first plowed that ground, his plow snagged on many large rocks just beneath the surface. So he set out the stakes where the rocks lay in order to avoid them in the future.

(<https://sermons.com/sermon/like-buoys-in-the-river/1343095>)

In a sense this is what God did by providing the Ten Commandments. It is like he said, "My laws warn you about the trouble spots. Watch out so you won't snag your plow." The purpose of the laws were to structure life in community so they and we can be in relationship with God.

When Christ began his ministry he discovered that to many keeping the laws over the years had become more important than the life they led one to follow. And the heart of the law was no longer beating as one. The body was not working as it should be. And so as Jesus began to teach the disciples what it meant to be a part of the kingdom of heaven he cautioned them "*do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets: I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.*" For within the law is found the way to become a priestly kingdom and a holy nation as God's most treasured possessions. But for the law to be fulfilled - to be completed as God desires - it requires us "to pass through the literal requirements of the law into the heart of the law." Our goal is not just to keep our hearts beating but to beat in the rhythm that provides a full and active life with God.

Tom Long in his commentary on Matthew shares a powerful image that illumines what Christ meant by fulfilling the law. He says:

"Think of a powerful searchlight scanning over the night sky. The way this beacon works is that a relatively small source of light is passed through a great lens, which magnifies it into a powerful radiance that spreads over the sky. Now think of a laser beam. Here the energy source is concentrated, its power transformed into a light of razor-sharp intensity. In Christ, the law becomes both a searchlight and a laser. When the law passes through the person and the event of Christ, it is both focused and enlarged, its potential is to illumine and to guide human life both amplified and

intensified.” (Westminster Bible Companion: Matthew, Thomas G. Long, p. 53)

For friends, when we work to understand the heart of the law we discover the broad purposes of God - that we be in a relationship with one another with love at the center of that relationship. And that we become who God desires us to be - a priestly kingdom serving one another and a holy nation that embodies God’s purposes to the world. And that is why here at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry Jesus said whoever follows the law and teaches the law “*will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*” For as we follow God’s laws and teach others to follow God’s laws we learn what it means to be a priestly kingdom and a holy nation filled with God’s most treasured possessions. Friends, that is what is at the heart of the law. May our hearts beat as one with God this day and forevermore.