

Something Like McArthur Park (1st is a 4 part series – The Role of LAW) Psalm 19  
Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV – 16th Sunday after Pentecost (October 2,) 2011

Psalm 19

<sup>1</sup>The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. <sup>2</sup>Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. <sup>3</sup>There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; <sup>4</sup>yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, <sup>5</sup>which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. <sup>6</sup>Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

<sup>7</sup>The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; <sup>8</sup>the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; <sup>9</sup>the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

<sup>10</sup>More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

<sup>11</sup>Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward. <sup>12</sup>But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. <sup>13</sup>Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

<sup>14</sup>Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

I read and listen to, Garrison Keillor because he is funny. I read, and listen to, Garrison Keillor, because he uses humor to soften the blow of being forced to stare into the mirror he puts in front of our face. He makes me understand more than I want to admit is true.

The latest book of his that I read is entitled Pontoon. It's a book about life (and death) in the little town of Lake Wobegon:

When Barbara discovered the body of her suddenly deceased mother Evelyn Peterson, she had no idea of how much her life was going to change. One of the biggest changes in her, Barbara -- as she discovered unknown secrets about her mother's life, and came face to face with several of her own issues -- was the recognition of her relationship with God.

For years, Barbara had heard the people at church say that God is love. But for those same years, Barbara now realized that they didn't mean it at all. God was a tough judgmental god who was always finding her and every one else coming up short.

This afternoon, Barbara decided that enough was enough. She didn't need that kind of god dragging her down any more. She didn't need that god, and she didn't need to keep drinking to try to forget about how that god always marked her shortcomings. Barbara gave up drinking and God that very afternoon.

How often, I wondered is that description true, *i.e.* that **people say they believe that God is a God of Love** – and **really believe that they believe it** – **but act** as though **God is only a god of judgment**, a **god of duty**, a **god of keeping score**.

How we deal with the issue of LAW in scripture and in our lives is very similar to this. And that's what this sermon series is going to look at: THE ROLE OF LAW IN OUR FAITH AND IN OUR LIVES.

THE LAW – what is it?

The **apostle Paul** – throughout most of his writings in the New Testament – presents the Law as a pretty dour and unhappy thing from which we Christians have been freed. At least, that's what I've grown up hearing all my life in the Church. Only problem is that – like Barbara in Keillor's book, it seems like while I've heard that, I don't so much get to see it.

As I study the First Testament, the teaching I keep coming back to over and over again is that **TORAH** – the Hebrew word that we so often translate as law, but which really means more; it **is TEACHING** – is described in the Psalm we used for the Call to Worship: **PSALM 19**.

There TORAH is described as the **WISDOM** which is bigger than language, which goes out to the ends of the universe, and descends into the most minute particle or wave known to quantum physics – TORAH is the DIRECTIONS FOR GOOD LIFE.

- ✦ **Jesus** said that he did **not come to do away with TORAH**. Rather, he said, he is the **FULFILLMENT of the TORAH**.
- ✦ **Jesus** said that he **came to bring us LIFE – abundant and eternal**.
- ✦ **Jesus** said that **HE is the Truth, the Way, the Life**.

What would it mean to us, if we **quit treating God like a JUDGE and like a loving parent, instead?**

What would it mean to us, if we **really accepted that God loves us and only wants the best for us?**

What would it mean for us, if we **were able to let go of some common but misguided habits and life decisions, and starting living life the way it was meant to be lived? What would it mean if we accepted THE LAW as God's recipe for**

**how life is meant to be lived, but not as a scorecard by which we are judged or accepted?**

Back in 1967, a promising young singer songwriter Jimmy Webb, was in love with Linda Ronstadt's cousin Susan. But the couple broke up, and the pain of that break up led Webb to composing the song, *McArthur Park*. The convoluted seven minute twenty-one second song went to #2 on the Billboard charts. Since then, it has been recorded by over 50 different recording artists.

In the throes of that 1967 heartbreak, Jimmy Webb wrote: ***"I will never have the recipe again."***

Based on his success in life – personally and professionally – there was much life to be found, after he gave up what he thought was the real deal.

And, today, Jimmy Webb talks openly about his return to the Christian faith of his upbringing and the role it has played in his music.

He wrote a [1986] cantata, *The Animals' Christmas*, [recorded by Art Garfunkel, Amy Grant, and the London Symphony Orchestra] and now often includes religious songs in his albums.

In an October 2007 interview with Nigel Bovey, editor of [The Salvation Army](#) newspaper [The War Cry](#), Webb was quite explicit about his renewed faith.

I couldn't write a song without God. To write anything meaningful I have to be in tune with God. He is the great source, my inspiration, the current that I have to connect to. Sadly I've not always used the gift He's given me — the answered prayer — as best as I could or should have. I've made mistakes. I've done things I wish I hadn't done.

Webb now affirms, **"I am a strong believer in God... God is important to me. God is bigger than any one particular denomination. I don't like it when people try to confine Him. I don't put any limits on God."**

God does have a **recipe for life**, and **for EACH of our lives**.

And it's **based upon God's love for us**.

**When all we can see is a god of judgment**, whose favor we are trying to win, by doing enough to please Him, **then all we can see of the law is a score card**.

If the **only way** we think we can **find satisfaction** is in **trying to do our duty**, then **our attention span is short**, **our relationship with God gets stunted**, and we **miss out on the joy of life God intends for us**.

**BUT IF** we can accept a **God of Love**, **Who has a recipe for good life**, then we might be **able to trust Him enough** to **lay back and rest**, and **claim all the good that God wants us to receive**.

We might learn to **quit putting limits on God**.

We might learn to **allow God to be**.

**THROUGH THIS SERMON SERIES**, I hope that each of us can open up to seeing God in a new way, to seeing God's TORAH as the blessing that it was meant to be, and to claiming that blessing as our own.

Duty bound people end up being judgmental.

**RESTING-IN-THE-LOVE-OF-GOD-PEOPLE** end up being loving and forgiving.

Duty bound people end up trying to make themselves feel good by putting other people down.

**RESTING-IN-THE-LOVE-OF-GOD-PEOPLE** end up experiencing God's liberating miracles in their lives and in others as well.

Duty bound people have a hard time letting God out of the box.

**RESTING-IN-THE-LOVE-OF-GOD-PEOPLE** see God doing things every day more than they can ask or imagine.

Duty bound people follow rules of politeness but can't really accept kindness for themselves, without seeing strings attached.

**RESTING-IN-THE-LOVE-OF-GOD-PEOPLE** don't worry about score keeping.

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May indeed the restraints and confinements of our life which bind us and God, both, somehow be broken upon the disappointments of life, to free us to receive and accept the glorious message of God's love that covers the full expanse of the universe, and releases us.

May indeed, your **old scorekeeping, judgmental god cake melt out in the rain** and you **discover the new recipe** that **makes life as good as God intends it to be**.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.