

The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 22
September 2, 2018
Deuteronomy 4:1-2, 6-9

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Observing vs. Beholding

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

It was my great joy early in my ministry to have met and sat at his feet as a student of Joseph Sittler. Martin Marty, whom I trust needs no introduction even years after his death, called Sittler “our sage and our seer.” He was an impressively insightful theologian who served as a pastor and professor of theology at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago for decades.

Among Sittler’s prodigious works is a small volume published shortly before his death in 1987 entitled “Gravity & Grace: Reflections and Provocations.” I reread significant portions of it this week and want to use some of his thinking both to illuminate today’s scripture and perhaps to pave the way a bit for the upcoming four-Sunday series of this year’s “Season of Creation” liturgies and sermons.

Sittler's chapter on "Nature and Grace" speaks eloquently to a sentiment that arises regularly for pastors. More frequently than you might think, folks say things like: “I don’t need the church. I can worship God on the beach. Or in the woods, or in the mountains, or on the golf course.” My response to such sentiments has always been skeptical, touting the importance of a community of faith where one can share that part of the truth each has come to know rather than wallowing in individual ignorance.

Sittler puts a far sharper edge on the importance of the church by making the distinction between the glory of God and the will of God. Yes, he admits, one can experience God's glory in the beauties of nature, just as one can know the conflicts and tragedies of life there. But to know the will of God, one needs the church.

In his own words: "We must read the text very carefully: ‘The heavens are telling the glory of God’ (Ps. 19:1). But we must not go on to say that the heavens disclose the will of God. By going out on Sunday morning and looking up at the heavens from the seventh tee, one has not performed an adequate act of obedience. The will of God is not disclosed via the heavens—though the glory of God, according to the Scriptures, is." (p. 13)

In the church alone—in the gathered people of God—can we know both the glory and the will of God. And here before us this morning in the book of Deuteronomy is an introduction to one of the two most prominent and profound revelations of God’s will, the law of Moses.

In this farewell address to the people of Israel just prior to their entrance into the Holy Land, Moses re-introduces the laws of God. The Ten Commandments are given again (They are first listed in Exodus 20) to the people in the next chapter, and here Moses

emphasizes their importance, their central identifying place in God's will for humanity. Since he will not be accompanying the people into the land of Canaan, he wants to be certain that they remember the gift of the law given at the beginning of the wanderings that led to this moment.

Moses also wants to ensure that the people understand how important keeping the law is to their well-being. He lists the reasons for conforming to these statutes: "So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you."

Simply put, by keeping the statutes and ordinances of God, the people are enabled to continue to live and to abide in the land. Obedience to the law permits the continuation of life.

That fact is repeatedly brought home to the Israelites as they occupy the Promised Land. Whenever they begin to forget that the land is God's and not their own, whenever they act as though it is theirs by right and not by covenant, God refreshes their memory, to put it nicely. The Babylonian Exile is a prime example. Repeated invasions of the land by foreign powers, as in the book of Judges, follow upon the cycles of disobedience by the people and their leaders.

Life and land given by the law? It's a strange idea for Christians to encounter in scripture. How can such a thing be? We consider it axiomatic as Christians that we live not by the law but by grace.

This is where Sittler's insight is so important to our understanding. The unique nature of the church's blessing for us is that it is here where we come to know God's will. The law is one of the principal means by which we come to a knowledge of God's will. The law is a window into the mind of God. Without it our knowledge of God would be greatly impoverished. Our other primary means by which we come to know God is Jesus Christ, who interestingly enough said that he came "to fulfill the law." For us as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, doing God's will is the faithful and natural response for one who loves God.

Life in the law? Certainly. The law helps us understand life together as God would have it be among us.

Moses continues his instruction: "You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you."

The laws are complete, and not to be changed. Oh, that reminds me. How many Lutherans does it take to change a light bulb? Two. One to do it; the other to complain about how much better the old one was. Or, none; Lutherans never change anything.

The law is unchanging as a revelation of the will of God. The glory of God, of course, was well known in ancient Israel. The stories of the mighty acts of God in calling Abraham to a new land, in passing down the covenant from generation to generation, and

in delivering the people from slavery in Egypt were well fixed in the minds of these wilderness wanderers. God's glory had been revealed in many ways. And through the event at Mount Sinai, the will of God too had been made known to them.

The pride of this people in their God shows through clearly here, but so also does their pride in the fact that theirs was not some vague knowledge of a God who was distant and impersonal. This God of theirs was special and unique. This was a God above all gods. This was the one and only God. And their law, clear, precise, practical, and detailed, was evidence of both the glory and the nearness of their God. This law was very nearly as worthy of praise as the God who gave it. It was perfect as it stood, and it would remain so. Nothing must be added, nor must anything be removed. The blessing of the law was good, proper, complete, and never to be changed. Both God and Moses clearly want to preserve the gift that has been given to this people in the wilderness. Its loss would be tantamount to losing their God, for in these commandments God had spoken directly to this people.

And furthermore, Moses directs: "You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!'"

Surely Moses exaggerates. We know the history of the people of Israel. Their witness to a faithful God betrays their own inability to fulfill the demands of the law. Still, Moses envisions the potentials of the obedient observance of a law given by a gracious God. He hopes to instill this vision in the people, that the wisdom and power of their god might bear fruit among all nations. There is a purpose in God's revelation of God's will. The people must be faithful if God's will is to be fulfilled.

Moses continues to offer praise for the law: "For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to God? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?"

Moses clearly associates the nearness of God to the gift of the law. This is a God who, in unique distinction from the idols of other nations, visits the people with special revelation, as at Sinai. The nation of Israel need not guess at the will of their God; this will has been revealed directly to them. They know how to act, how to live, how to resolve disputes, and how to honor their God because their God is very near to them, providing strength, comfort, and guidance. The supremely high quality of their law is witness to the nearness of their God, who has also provided the very land in which they live as a blessing to them. It is not only the New Testament that reveals how near God is. Emmanuel, God with us, was a reality also for ancient Israel.

The land and the law are inseparable, and the land of promise we now know is not just the land of Canaan but the entire planet Earth. Sittler notes the inadequacy of mere law or even the concept of stewardship as we seek to relate more faithfully to God's gift of the environment. In doing so, Sittler comments on several conferences he attended over a brief period of time. One was at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, dealing with the responsibility of scientists for the environment. Another, conducted for law professors, examined the role of law in environmental preservation. The third involved clergy in reflection on theology and nature.

Similar conclusions were reached in each. This is the remarkable statement that came from the scientists: "There is much that the scientific community can do, and much more that we propose to do about the care of the environment. But no conceivable enhancement of research methodology, no conceivable addition of public funds, no cries of warning will make any considerable difference unless we are all changed in the spirit of our minds."

"With our minds we look at things, but in the spirit of our minds we behold things. The difference here is not only linguistic. To look at a thing is what the psychologists call an act of perception. To behold a thing means to regard it in its particularity—its infinite preciousness, irreplaceability, and beauty...the change in the spirit of our minds must come about by putting the grace of God behind the eyes with which we look at the world and into the hands with which we touch the world." (p. 16, 20)

The grace of God's law, recommended by the premier prophet in Hebrew Scriptures, is the grace of knowing the mind and the will of God. Through this law, not seen in faith as mere duty or obligation but honor and privilege, we may find the guidance we need for true care of the land—the Earth—that we love, as well as the loves we enjoy upon it.

It is not sufficient merely to give glory to God in the thrill of the sunset or the joy of the hymn; giving glory extends beyond the response of the heart to the act of the self, guided by a change in the spirit of our minds. We need instruction in the grace of God's gift of the law as surely as did those wilderness people looking hopefully to the west before entering the Promised Land—as does every generation.

"...take care and watch yourselves closely, so as neither to forget the things that your eyes have seen nor to let them slip from your (beholding) mind all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children's children..." (Deut. 4:9) May the coming weeks assist us in this essential obedience for the sake of the world. May we learn to behold and not merely observe the Earth in its infinite preciousness, irreplaceability, and beauty. May we change in the spirit of our minds by putting the grace of God behind the eyes with which we look at the world and into the hands with which we touch the world. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant and eternal life. Amen.