

Lent 1
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

February 22, 2015
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The Law of Love

Karisse and I have begun watching a show on Sunday evenings that we like a lot. It's called *Grantchester*, and it comes on right after *Downton Abbey*. It's also set in England. It's about a parish priest who is also something of an amateur detective. When crimes happen among the people of his town he usually figures out how and why the crime was committed, and justice is served. But there is always another something going on in the plotline as well, usually a spiritual lesson of some kind for him or one of his people. His side-kick, a real detective with the police force, is a hard-bitten cop, and a professed atheist. He makes a counterpoint to Fr. Sidney that works very well.

In a recent episode the cop's infant son is deathly ill. His wife is nursing the child as best she can, but she is desperate. The fever seems to be claiming the life of the little boy. Fr. Sidney finds the cop in the local pub, already having drunk too much, and angry at the world. "Go home," he tells his friend, who blows him off. A while later he comes to his priest friend. Sober now, he confesses that he has not been himself lately. Sidney takes him home, and when they approach the boy's crib it is empty. Just as Sidney is about to offer his condolences to his stunned and broken friend they hear a sound behind them. The boy's mother is standing there with the boy wrapped in a blanket in her arms. "His fever broke," she croaks out in a stress-torn voice. "He's going to be OK."

The cop, completely broken, says, "I'm sorry! I'm so, so sorry!"

Lent is not so much about having broken a bunch of rules, though that is certainly true of every one of us. In breaking the rules we have alienated ourselves people who are important to us, from God, from other people, from ourselves, and from the rest of creation. Lent is about looking God in the face and in the wake of the hurt and pain we have caused, to say from the heart, "I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry."

The Law of Love differs from the Law of the Land in this absolutely essential way. The law of the land governs by a list of rules by which society is supposed to live well. When you break those rules you cause harm to the fabric of society, therefore you own society a debt of reparation. Repentance is ultimately about restoration.

The law of love governs a relationship. When we break the law of love we alienate ourselves from that relationship. In the law of love repentance is not about a debt to be paid, it is always relational. It is always about healing a rift. It is always about

reconciliation

We see this theme in the lessons for today. In the first lesson God promises not to flood the earth again. As a sign of this promise he puts the rainbow in the sky. But to whom is he promising this? Is it not to humanity—to creation itself? God does not do this merely for the sake of God's own self, but for the sake of the relationship that God has with creation?

The Epistle lesson speaks to us about the work of Christ on the Cross. He did not merely die and rise again, but in the vision of this writer Jesus goes to the place of the dead and proclaims to them the resurrection of the dead. That resurrection is anticipated by the water of Noah's flood, which is a sign of the water of baptism, that rite by which we recognize the relationship we have with God. These people are important to God, even though they are not in heaven, and so are we.

In the Gospel lesson today Jesus is baptized and then launches his preaching mission. His message is an interesting one, "Repent!" We normally think of that as something hard or unpleasant to do, but according to Jesus, the reason to repent is to signify one's belief in the Good News. In other words, repentance leads to something, it's not an end in itself—it leads to good news. That good news is the forgiveness we have in Christ. Forgiveness is given and received in the context of a relationship. The purpose of Jesus' preaching is to reconcile a damaged relationship between God and creation.

So how do we put feet on this? This is the first Sunday of Lent. This is the season in which we learn to say, "I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry!"

Many of us have chosen Lenten disciplines by which to form our souls after the heart of God for the next 6 weeks. Some of us have chosen to give up something, some of us have chosen to add something. And all of that is good. But there is always the question of relationship. We need to ask ourselves, Why am I doing this? What am I hoping to accomplish through this discipline? What am I hoping to have different by the end of this time compared to the beginning?

We often think of this in terms of becoming a better person. By whose standards are we measuring? Are we not measuring against an internal standard of our own, Or what we believe the Word of God requires of us? Are these not lists of rules, laws, if you please, that we are trying to obey? Yes, too often we approach Lent as to a statute of law. It is self-focused, and though we always seem to fall a bit short of our ideal, yet it is easier than the Law of Love.

In the final analysis Lent is about relationships. The first one is your relationship with God. Without paying attention to this first and primal relationship none of the other relationships make any sense. Jesus says, "Repent and believe the Good News." Make this about your relationship with God.

What about your Lenten discipline will draw you closer to the heart of God? How will it remove that which distracts? How will it enhance that which enables and inspires? How will it be your way of saying to God, like that detective, "I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry!"

What about your Lenten discipline will open your heart to the divine gift to the world that God has hidden in your own innermost being? How will it draw out from deep within you the wisdom and compassion of God in this world? How will it show in the world what God is doing in your life? How will it give voice to your world in saying to God, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry for hiding what you have given me!"

But that relationship cannot be separated from your relationships with other people, indeed, with the whole of creation. Jesus' summary of the Law reads in two parts: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. How do we show our love for God, but by loving ourselves, our neighbors and the world in which God has placed us? The second part of the summary is important because it puts feet on the first part. Make this about your relationships with others and with your world.

How will your Lenten disciplines make you wiser and more compassionate with others in your life? How will your Lenten discipline make you more responsive to those in need around you? How will your Lenten discipline put you more at harmony with the rhythms of the earth and its care? To whom do you need to say, "I'm sorry, I'm so, so sorry!"

I have told you this story before but bears repeating. A number of years ago I was imposing ashes on the members of my then-congregation. A young woman with her 5-year-old daughter kneeled before me at the rail. I put ashes on the forehead of the little girl and said, "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." I proceeded to do the same for her mother. And then the little girl gave me the image that will forever live in my mind as the quintessential meaning of Lent.

She leaned over and kissed her mother's cheek.

It's all about relationships!