

**Colossians 3:12-17**     **Exodus 20:1-17; Jeremiah 31:31-34**  
**March 16, 2014**     **Second Sunday of Lent**  
*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

## **A WAY OF BEING THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

One of the highlights of the recent meeting of the Presbytery of Coastal Carolina at First Presbyterian Church in Morehead City was the installation of Rev. Doug Cushing as the organizing pastor of the Bridge Presbyterian Church in the north Brunswick County/Leland area. The Bridge Church is the first new church development in our presbytery is almost eighteen years. Doug brings a wealth of experience and commitment to this church-planting, as well as a passion for helping God's people find a covenant community in which to live out their faith.

Visit the Bridge's website at [www.thebridgepres.org](http://www.thebridgepres.org), and you'll find the following mission statement: "The mission of the Bridge Presbyterian Church is to connect people with God's people in their lives, God's passion in their lives, and God's purpose in their lives." Doug shared with the presbytery that the people they have connected with so far are (1) looking for a community of fellow believers through which they can (2) nurture a closer relationship with God and (3) discover or re-discover a meaningful purpose in their lives.

Doug received a standing ovation last Saturday at the conclusion of his installation service. Actually, I think all of us there were standing and clapping because of the excitement and great promise of this new church development in north Brunswick County. As Doug said, "The church is already there in the Leland area. God is already at work forming the Bridge Presbyterian Church. I've just been called to work with people as we discover what God is already doing in their lives and community."

The Bridge's mission statement is a good mission statement for any congregation, including ours: "to connect people with God's people in their lives, God's passion in their lives, and God's purpose in their lives." This is a good way of being the Christian community. Over the years, I've been surprised and pleased when people have said, "I remember something Phil said in a New Member class: Being Presbyterian isn't the **only** way to be a Christian, but it's a good and scriptural way to be a Christian." That was an insight shared by one of our seminary professors. It says a lot about our life together in the Wallace Presbyterian Church. We Presbyterians don't have a corner on the market when it comes to being "the covenant community of faith." However, throughout our history as Presbyterian Christians, we have put a premium on our common life of faith, and how we live out our faith with our fellow believers.

Our Presbyterian *Book of Order* has this to say about our mutual relationship as part of the Body of Christ: “*The polity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) presupposes the fellowship of women, men, and children united in covenant relationship with one another and with God through Jesus Christ. The organization rests on the fellowship and is not designed to work without trust and love.*” (G-1.0102)

In a sense, that’s another way of saying, “You shall have no other gods before me . . . you shall not make for yourself an idol . . . you shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God . . . remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy . . . honor your father and your mother . . . you shall not murder . . . you shall not commit adultery . . . you shall not steal . . . you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor . . . you shall not covet.”

The negative (“you shall not . . .”) implies the positive (“you shall . . .”), as we heard from Colossians: “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience . . . bear with one another . . . forgive each other . . . clothe yourselves with love . . . let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. . . let the word of Christ dwell in you richly . . . admonish one another in all wisdom . . . with gratitude sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God . . . whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

Someone recently said the Ten Commandments are shaped like a cross. There is our vertical relationship with God (in the first four commandments) and our horizontal relationship with one another (in the last six commandments). You can’t separate the four from the six. Oh, you can try to do that, but scripture itself tells us we’re only fooling ourselves when we do that: “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” (1 John 4:20-21)

What the Ten Commandments and the letter to the Colossians and the first letter of John are all telling us, is something Presbyterians hold dear: Faith is always personal, but never private. When God calls us to faith, God calls us to relationship, not just with him, but with our fellow Christians. That’s why God says, in effect, up there on Mt. Sinai, “This is how I want you to live as my people — not just as individuals trying to lead a good life, but as a community of believers who seek to follow my way in your lives.”

In an interview in *Christianity Today*, Jim Wallis, the long-time publisher of the Christian magazine, *Sojourners*, talked about his understanding of an always personal, but never private, faith. He said, “I was raised in a very evangelical church, but when I became aware of the racism in our city and wanted to do something about it, I was told, ‘Jim, you have to understand that Christianity has nothing to do with racism. That’s political. And our faith is personal.’ That’s when I left the church and joined the Civil Rights Movement. God is personal but never private. God knows everything about us and wants a relationship anyway. Why? To sign us up for his purposes in the world. I

didn't hear that as a kid. I heard about me and the Lord, not about God's purpose for the world.”<sup>1</sup>

So, how do we discover God’s purpose for the world and our place in God’s purpose? Many years ago, I led a Bible study on Psalm 19 about God’s law: “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.” (Psalm 19:7-10)

As we talked about Psalm 19, I asked, “Why should we follow God’s law?” To be honest, I was “fishing” for a certain answer; something along the lines of “Because we’re thankful for God has done for us” or “Because God wants us to live a certain way as his people.” I wasn’t prepared for the answer one person gave: “So we won’t go to hell!”

I suppose that’s an honest answer, but I’m not sure it’s the first and foremost motivation for trying to live in sync with God’s purposes for our lives and for this world. Think about it this way. Why do you follow the traffic laws? Is it so you won’t get a ticket, have to pay a fine, get points on your insurance, or lose your license? What if you knew you wouldn’t get caught? Would the laws still matter to you? Or, do you follow the traffic laws because you know there’s something bigger at stake than just your own well-being and clean driving record? What about the safety of the community as a whole? What about the well-being of your fellow citizens? What about the sense of order and safety that obeying the traffic laws helps to create?

All of the scripture verses I have quoted this morning about “being the Christian community” have something in common. The call to live a certain way in a community of believers begins with what God has already done for us. Listen:

\* before God’s people were given the Ten Commandments, they were reminded, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

\* before Jeremiah tells God’s people about the “new covenant written on their hearts,” he preaches the word of the Lord to them, “It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.”

\* when Paul describes for the Colossian Christians what a new life in Christ looks like, he says, “As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved . . . just as the Lord has forgiven you.”

\* before John instructs the Christians in his community of faith that “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also,” he reminds them, “We love because [God] first loved us.” (1 John 4:19)

You would think the law of God and the grace of God would be at opposite ends of the spectrum. And yet, the Ten Commandments, Jeremiah's words about the new covenant, and Paul's instructions about living the Christian life all point out the close connection between God's law and God's grace. Oh, we don't always get it right. We hear God's commandments and instructions and we inevitably fall into one of two traps:

\* either we struggle to meet the letter of the law so that we end up being legalists (usually more in how we judge other people than in how we take stock of our own lives)

OR

\* we become self-righteous, and say or think to ourselves, "Thank God I'm not like **those** people."

Either way lacks grace — the grace of God.

One writer has put it this way: "the Christian is not only a forgiven person but an ethical person. . . The elect person is called to a life of service and obedience. The forgiven person is summoned to live by the law of God after having heard the comforting words of the liturgy and the declaration of forgiveness."<sup>2</sup>

There's a reason our Prayer of Confession and Assurance of Pardon come at the beginning of our worship service each Sunday. We have the chance to confess honestly before God and our neighbors that we don't measure up to God's law and purposes for our lives. But we also have the chance to hear that God's love and purpose for our lives doesn't depend on our being perfect. That is a matter of grace in Jesus Christ, who died for our sins so that we might live for God. There's a reason we hear God's Word and respond to God's Word after we receive the Assurance of Pardon. God's love and grace through Jesus Christ are the foundation and the motivation for us to live ethical lives in the community of believers.

And that's a **very good way** of being the Christian community!

***Let us pray: Holy Spirit, you are the source of unity and peace. Empower us to live a life worthy of our calling. Help us to walk in love, humility, and patience, just as our Lord Jesus did. Amen.***

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "Personal but Never Private: Jim Wallis and Mark Dever don't see eye to eye, but they do agree on justice. A Leadership interview with Mark Dever and Jim Wallis," at [www.christianitytoday.com/le/2010/summer/personalneverprivate.html?start=2](http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2010/summer/personalneverprivate.html?start=2)

<sup>2</sup> John H. Leith, *An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), p. 77.