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There is sort of a set of “unwritten rules” of Lutheran sermons. So if you wonder what makes preachers tick, or how we were wired, this might be a reason to listen up. I will tell you, in all seriousness, what my assignment is:

First, always proclaim both the Law and the Gospel, because the Law leads us to readiness to hear and accept the Gospel. They are not the same thing. Some preachers, without this rule, get stuck in their own worlds, either lambasting everyone with fire and brimstone, or offering them cheap grace—nothing but warm feelings and what we used to call “apple pie, by-and-by, in the sky.” But to proclaim both the Law and the Gospel means that we all understand the balance of God’s righteousness and God’s merciful grace. It is because human beings are such miserable screw-ups when it comes to satisfying God’s righteousness, that we must rely not on our stellar performance of it, but simply on the faith that, for the *sake of Jesus*, we are accepted, loved and redeemed *anyway*.

The second rule is that a sermon should always finish with the Gospel. If it has begun by encouraging people to come to terms with the Law of God, it must help people find joy and hopefulness in the Gospel. Don’t leave people hanging, in other words. There is a direction from Law to Gospel that is really important. Otherwise, you walk away thinking that the Gospel is conditional, that Jesus died on the cross for your sins, and *if you don’t* clean up your act, measure up, repent, walk the straight-and-narrow, avoid everything that’s “sinful or fattening,” and keep your tongue in the middle of your mouth, God won’t love you anymore and you won’t go to heaven.

In other words, the Law can point us toward the Gospel, the Good News that we are saved by grace through faith. But the Gospel does not lead us back into Law. The Christian message of hope and joy and faith is not simply a whole new set of commandments to follow. Grace does not lead to guilt, and the preacher had better be clear about that.

Now, the only problem is, the readings appointed for today lean heavily on the Law. They make it tough to proclaim both Law and Gospel, and tougher to keep the direction clear from legalism toward liberty in faith.

In the First Reading from the prophet Isaiah we have a facetious tale, told as if God is telling it ~ in the form of a love-song that God sings about his beloved vineyard. God has done everything right, and built a lovely vineyard. Makes us think of the California wine country—the fertile hillsides with their rows of green grape vines cascading down the gentle slopes of the coastal hills. God’s vineyard was supposed to be perfect. The soil is fertile, not too rocky. God has chosen excellent varietal grapes, not the kind they make “Two buck chuck” with. God has even built the winepress, expecting to have a great winery. But for some reason, the grapes are not excellent grapes, but wild grapes. Small and sour, tasteless, and useless.

This facetious Love-Song of course would be perfect set to country music, because it is a “somebody did somebody wrong song.” God is broken-hearted, and in anger decides to dismantle and destroy the vineyard, and let it be taken over by thorns, and briars. And just to be sure, tear down the wall, uproot the plants, and make sure no rain falls on it, either.

And just in case people don’t get it, Isaiah the prophet makes it very, very clear. “For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting.” It is God, then, who expected good fruit, and got small and sour, tasteless and useless fruit.

Then Jesus, in the Gospel Reading, kind of “nods” to Isaiah the prophet, and tells his own story. A landowner plants a vineyard, does everything right, and puts tenants in charge of it, expecting that at the harvest time he will receive his share of the produce. But when the servants, his slaves, come

to collect, they are rejected, beaten, and even killed. Even the son, the heir, is thrown out and killed. The point Jesus seems to be making harks back to the prophets, who warn the Chosen People that God expected excellent results, a bountiful harvest, and is not happy with what those results turn out to be. In Jesus' story, of course, we can see that the messengers or slaves sent to the tenants are the prophets themselves, for it had become a byword that the people would always kill the messenger rather than take the message to heart.

So, in each parable, Isaiah and Matthew, the Law side of proclamation is unmistakable. And the trick here is to entrap the guilty by asking their opinions of injustice. It is like a judge looking at a defendant and asking the defendant to judge what is right. "And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem, and people of Judah, you judge between me and my vineyard," says God in Isaiah's story. And in the parable which Jesus tells, it is the same trap. "When the owner of the vineyard comes," he says, "what will he do to those tenants?" Jesus lets his audience pronounce the dire punishment on the murderous tenants.

The conclusions which the audience is supposed to draw, then, from each of these tales, is that the people have it coming. The people have been faithless, fruitless, heartless. They deserve to be punished, and even admit it, when you put it to them in a couple of simple stories.

The only problem is, my friends, it is pointless to blame *some other* Chosen People, thousands of years ago, for being fruitless, faithless, or heartless. We are the people who have this message in our laps, or at hand, today, and if we are people of faith, we must wrestle with the reality that stories like this point the finger *at us*. Not chief priests, not Pharisees, but Christians.

Even if there was a time, when God un-chose the Chosen people, punished them, took the vineyard away from their stewardship and turned it over to Christians, if there is anything at all in the sacred book which applies to us today, we cannot squirm out of the Law part of it by saying God was criticizing, or scolding, or condemning *someone else*.

There is, of course, great value, in personalizing the Law. We have no need to make this all theoretic. If people then learned by hearing stories, so do we. You have only to sit through a 12-Step meeting and hear one or two speakers tell their stories. They blame no one else. They open themselves up so that others, who may have "hit bottom" with their addictions — and continued to dig — can see that they are not alone. Denial is not part of recovery, and it's not part of repentance, either. "If the shoe fits," you know, chances are the shoe of shortcoming, the shoe of sin, the shoe of failure, fits a lot of people. Or as St. Paul says in Romans, "All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God."

So in the Second Reading today, Paul himself shares his story. We have a bit of difficulty here, coming in to the middle of a longer story, but the gist of it for Paul was to admit he used to brag about his own personal righteousness, because he was very religious according to the standards of his day and his religion. He was circumcised. He was a member of the chosen people, he could trace his ethnic and religious roots back centuries. He was a Pharisee, which was sort of a modern movement of faithful people who took the laws of the Bible very, very seriously, and he considered himself to be an over-achiever in that department. "Blameless," he says. Blameless, and even a persecutor of the Christian church, meaning, he didn't buy into this revisionist stuff. He was a true Jew, through and through, and proud of it.

So this was Paul's story, *but right* here he tells you why he was no longer "sticking to it." From a slightly different translation [NIV], let me do an instant reply here:

"But whatever was my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes

from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ.”

It is one thing to drop your past, like so much beat-up luggage. It is one thing to walk away from your failures, your screw-ups, your regrets, and pray to God to have a chance to start over in life. But Paul is speaking here as some one coming from the other direction. He was the genuine “self-righteous” type—who sincerely believed that by his own hard work, with his own credentials, he measured up very nicely to God’s Law, and could feel proud—even smug—about his gain, his profit, his status.

But the point of Paul’s personal story is not that God knocked him off his high horse. He was converted, as we know, and rather than persecuting the church of Christ, he became its biggest champion. But the point of Paul’s story fits the second “rule” I mentioned a minute ago about sermons: the direction that a sermon is going should reflect the direction of God’s gracious dispensation to us. If we begin with God’s Law, *most of us* don’t measure up. We fail. We despair. We are driven to plead only for God’s mercy and grace. And we find that gracious word in the Gospel, the Good News that we are redeemed, on God’s right side, *not* because of our good deeds or best intentions, but because of grace alone. That grace does not lead us back into legalism—as if we always need to watch our back in fear that we will “backslide” and fall from grace and God will abandon us once again.

What did I say a moment ago? Weren’t you taking this down? “The Gospel does not lead us back into Law. The Christian message of hope and joy and faith is not simply a whole new set of commandments to follow. Grace does not lead to guilt.”

So if there is any one message in the entire New Testament I would seriously hope you take note of, it is right here in Philippians 3. “I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.” It is not really about using Law as a whip to beat us into God’s grace, nor about using grace like “a carrot on a stick” to lead us back into good deeds and very strict behavior. “I consider everything a loss,” he says, compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord.”

Everything, he says. That includes the whole system, the whole mentality of trying to negotiate with God, shine it on with God, work the system, store up brownie points on earth to trade for stars in my crown in the hereafter. Do you see? All of that stuff is worthless, rubbish. We talked recently about the contrast between being religious and being spiritual. And Paul’s point here is to put all the religious stuff behind him as rubbish, as of having no value, because of his deep relationship with Christ Jesus as Lord. My friends, there is no other qualifying exam. There will be no quiz at the end. Paul is not even saying that law or legalism or strictness or straight-and-narrow behavior *are wrong*. He is simply saying that they are surpassed, eclipsed, *made worthless* in comparison to the power of knowing Christ.

For some people, sticking to the strictest, narrowest interpretation of the Bible is a good thing. Trying really hard to please God, they believe, is a good thing. It is like having a little light to hold up against the darkness of the world, and it feels very secure because they believe God loves them for their strictness. But in Paul’s understanding, this little light against the moral darkness is worthless in the light of the dawning day when the Son of Righteousness rises, and his glory eclipses all our self-righteousness. We do not need to rely on our best efforts, which are kind of lousy at best anyway, because God has counted the righteousness of Jesus Christ to our ledger and our balance sheets. God’s love is better than our half-hearted efforts, God’s grace is better than our works, God’s redemption is better than our attempts to save ourselves.

And this is Gospel, my friends—Good News that if we don’t have to keep striving to prove ourselves, we are free to change ourselves, improve ourselves, re-invent ourselves, grow spiritually, and give ourselves away, for Christ’s sake, to follow in his steps, to “Forget about what lies behind, straining forward to what lies ahead.” Amen.