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FINDING LOVE IN THE LAW

What comes to mind when you think about GOD?

- What picture comes to mind when you imagine what GOD is like?
- What feelings are invoked in you as you consider GOD?

I realize this is a tricky question.

- Scripture regularly describes the impossibility of actually seeing GOD, let alone fully understanding GOD.
  - When Moses asked to see GOD, the most GOD offered was putting Moses in the cleft of a rock face so that all he could see was the trail of GOD'S glory as GOD passed by.
    - That's all he gets, because, GOD tells him, "No one can see ME and live." (Exodus 33:20-33)
  - Similarly in the first chapter of the Gospel of John, we are told that "no one has seen GOD." (John 1:19)

Nevertheless, I suspect that most of us have some image or concept of GOD, some sense of what GOD is like that profoundly shapes what we expect from GOD, how we think about faith, and even how we think about each other.

- If I was to go further and ask each of you to try to describe that, or if you were to inquire of people on the street about that, some—possibly even many—would detail a concept of GOD that includes making and enforcing rules.
  - GOD as law-giver.
  - GOD as one sitting in heaven with a finger perpetually raised in warning and perhaps in accusation.
  - Some might have a sense that GOD loves others, but GOD couldn't/doesn't love me,
    - or GOD loves me, but couldn't/doesn't love...and then you fill in the blank.
  - For many it's a picture of GOD captured by a line in that familiar American folk hymn: "HE knows when you are sleeping; HE knows when you're awake; HE knows if you've been bad or good, so be good for goodness' sake!"
    - Okay, so I'm being a little tongue-in-cheek there, but I do think many, many folks in our community see GOD as something like a stern Santa Claus, promising gifts, but always ready to judge us for breaking GOD'S laws.

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You certainly might have that feeling after today's readings from Deuteronomy and Matthew.

- After this heavy dose of law and, indeed, some of the penalties for disobeying the law, it might be hard to think of GOD as anything but strict and judgmental.
- But by looking at these readings more closely, I think we might find a more beneficial sense of GOD'S law, and indeed, a clearer picture of the GOD we worship.
  - Three related elements of the law stand out as deserving our attention.

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First, the law is always given as a gift.

- The law, particularly in the Ten Commandments that JESUS references (You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery.) are life's little instruction book, given by GOD to help us get more out of this life.
  - Remember that the Commandments were given *after* GOD had already declared that Israel would be GOD'S people.
    - This means that the law is not a means by which we become GOD'S people or to earn GOD'S love,
      - but rather is a gift given to GOD'S people *because* GOD loves us.

To help us understand it that way, Martin Luther talked about two Uses of the Law.

- The First Use of the Law is when we examine ourselves under the law and find ourselves falling way short of GOD'S vision and hope for our lives.
    - When we honestly admit that we have spoken poorly of others, damaged or destroyed our relationships, looked upon others as merely objects for our pleasure, or frankly made things more important in our lives than GOD, we are driven to our knees in repentance.
      - But it is on our knees as we confess our need for GOD'S forgiveness that we are brought closer to GOD and to GOD'S grace.
  - Once we have claimed that grace, the Second Use of the Law is that it guides us in how we might show our appreciation to GOD, by putting GOD first, by looking upon others as being created in the image of GOD, and by seeking to treat others the way we would wish to be treated.
  - The law is given as a gift for the purpose of bringing us closer to the GOD who loves us and wants what is best for our lives.
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The second thing that stands out is that the law is given as a gift to strengthen community.

- The word "you" in both Deuteronomy and Matthew is plural.
  - You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery.
    - Again, the use of "you" is plural, as in all of you.

The law isn't about meeting our individual needs, but about creating and sustaining a community in which all of GOD'S children can find nurture, health, safety, and blessing.

- The Jewish Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur is focused on releasing the sins, not of the individual, but the entire nation.
    - The sins of one are understood to be the sins of all, as the community has failed to support and encourage one another adequately.
  - The logic behind this biblical focus on community is simple.
    - When you're looking out for yourself, it's you against the world, and your approach to life becomes "me first."
    - When you look out for the others in your community and they, in turn, look out for you, it's the community together that faces the challenges, setbacks and opportunities the world offers.
      - GOD'S law is not given for me alone, or you alone, or each of us alone, but for all of us together that all might be blessed.
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Third, the law is given as a gift to strengthen community by moving our focus to the needs of our neighbor.

- Let's be very clear that the law of GOD isn't meant to remove the neighbor and his or her needs from our view or concern.
  - Rather it draws us closer to our neighbor.
- Perhaps you've heard of Joel Osteen's book Your Best life Now?
  - I'd like to suggest that this book would be a lot closer to the biblical vision of life given by GOD if it had been titled Your Neighbor's Best Life Now.
  - At election time don't ask, "Is my life better than two or four years ago?" but rather, "Is my neighbor's life better?"
- That's why in this Sermon on the Mount, JESUS intensifies the law to help us avoid seeing the law as merely drawing moral boundaries about who's bad and who's good, for goodness' sake—
  - and instead alerts us to our responsibility to care for those around us.

- We can easily discriminate, injure, neglect, reject, or speak poorly of another,
    - and all the while be saying, “But I haven’t killed.”
  - Yet JESUS deepens and strengthens the law to make us more responsible for our neighbor’s well-being.
    - For by caring for our neighbor, we strengthen a community that can best serve GOD by being a blessing to the community.
    - This is GOD’S constant command and expectation for GOD’S people.
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When a man I know of, Frank, was about eight-years-old, he got into an argument with his sister.

- Before long, arguing turned to pushing and shoving, and, soon enough, Frank had his younger sister pinned to the floor with his fist raised in the air.
    - At that moment, his mother came into the room and told him to stop.
  - In response, Frank reared up as only an eight-year-old can and declared, with his fist still raised in the air, “She’s my sister. I can do anything I want to her!”
    - Immediately, Frank’s mom flew across the room, towered over him and said, “She’s my daughter—*no you can’t!*”
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That’s the law: GOD’S gift to protect and care for GOD’S children.

- At times, we might see the law as negative or a threat,
    - but it is because GOD cares so deeply about GOD’S children—*all* of GOD’S children—that GOD gives it.
    - GOD says, “No, you can’t hoard everything.
    - “No, you can’t discriminate and exclude.
    - “No, you can’t violate and exploit.
    - “No, you can’t do these things, because she is MY daughter, and he is MY son,
      - and they and you are deeply loved by GOD.
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So, what is your picture of GOD?

- Students who lodged in Martin and Katherine Luther’s home once asked the great reformer that very question.
  - Luther responded this way: “When I think of GOD, I think of a man hanging on a tree.”
    - Because in the cross of CHRIST, we see GOD’S love poured out for the whole world,
    - and we are reminded that GOD will go to any and all lengths to tell us just how much GOD loves us,
    - so that we, in turn, may better love one another.

The Law is a gift from GOD given that our communities might be strengthened as we care about one another.

- And it is given so that we will be brought closer to the ONE who loves us unconditionally.