

THE LONG FORGOTTEN LAW

NEHEMIAH 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
LUKE 4:14-21

A SERMON FOR EPIPHANY III
SUNDAY, JANUARY 27, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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This morning, we're going to focus on the Old Testament lesson for today.

Let me set the stage for you: The Israelites had been in exile in Babylon. They had been slaves. Their land had been laid bare, their Holy City of Jerusalem had been leveled, the temple of Solomon had been destroyed.

But God was at work in the hearts and minds of the kings who kept the Israelites in bondage. This return happened in four stages. Under King Cyrus, in about 538 BC, under Darius I, between 521 and 485 BC, under Artaxerxes I, between 464 and 423 BC, led by Ezra, and finally the return led by Nehemiah under Artaxerxes II, who reigned between 404-358 BC.

Nehemiah had been there twice before, working with Ezra, to restore the city, first re-building the walls and then re-building the temple.

It was probably during the efforts to re-build the walls that a scroll was found, buried in the rubble. The scroll was viewed with reverence. It was the word of the Lord. It was a scroll that had been hidden, perhaps, or dropped by a scribe fleeing the city, and preserved almost miraculously for all those years.

They assembled the people who had returned from the exile, and Ezra, scribe and priest that he was, read to them the long forgotten law.

It was like a message from the past, like a message direct from God.

Ezra read the word of the Lord, the Law of God, from the scroll, and he read it in Hebrew, and the Levites translated it into Aramaic, the language the people were speaking, and interpreted the law of God, the word of God, to them. He started reading early in the morning, and didn't finish until noontime. And the people wept when they heard it.

The implication, the conclusion to draw, is that they had forgotten the law of God, that they simply no longer remembered it. They wept out of a conviction of their sins, out of a feeling of guilt, for they had abandoned the ways of their forbearers, they had in ignorance and in forgetfulness failed to obey the law that God had given them, and they were sorry for their sins.

The Levites, who had translated for them, urged them not to weep, but to celebrate, to eat comfort foods and drink sweet wine, and have a party, not because they had sinned, but because they had recovered the law, and now had a code to live by, a guide to their faith and practice.

I am sure that there are laws on the books that we have forgotten, that we disobey and break every day.

Several years ago, Polly's brother, Don Smith had a home on a lake in Charlotte County, Florida. He built a privacy fence along the boundary of his property, right next to his neighbor's chain-link fence. The neighbor took umbrage with the fence, which partially blocked his view of

the lake, and took the issue to the homeowners association. They got out the original covenants of the development, and discovered that in the restrictions for the neighborhood, no fences were allowed. Now this led to great uproar, because many of the homes had fences. They had forgotten the law, buried it, ignored it, and now what were they to do? Well, they changed the restriction to allow fences.

We cannot change God's laws that way.

During the holidays, our son and his wife came to visit. They arrived much earlier than we expected them to. He told me, "Dad, I was just running with traffic. On I-10, if I tried to run 70, traffic would back up behind me, and I was afraid I would cause a wreck, so I ran 80, and cars were still passing me like we were standing still."

Have we forgotten the law? Or do we just ignore it?

How many other laws get forgotten, ignored?

Many states have recently legalized or at least decriminalized the use of marijuana. There is discussion about that in Tallahassee. A good friend of mine, former police chief and highway patrolman, advocates the legalization of all abused drugs, saying that the prisons are full of people who really don't belong there, and that the "big fish" never get caught, that it is costing a fortune to house people whose only crime is addiction. He advocates putting a tax on drugs, like the tax on alcohol and tobacco.

Well, to me, that is a radical position, but in the society in which we live, the law is often ignored if not forgotten.

Maybe we need to change the drug laws.

But we cannot change God's laws.

When Ezra read from the scroll in the ruins and new construction that was Jerusalem, he obviously read more than the Ten Commandments. He probably read Deuteronomy, and maybe Leviticus as well, and he read the law that the people had forgotten, and they wept.

If I read that portion of scripture to you this morning, you probably wouldn't weep, you'd sleep. Or maybe you would weep, from boredom. It is all we can do to make it through the Ten Commandments.

But that is really probably all the Law we need to know. If we didn't forget, if we didn't ignore, the laws that God handed to Moses, our lives, our world would be a better place.

We remembered a long ago made but not yet forgotten Supreme Court decision this week. Roe versus Wade. As I thought about that this week, I thought that if we hadn't forgotten, had not ignored, God's law, as a society, that decision would not have been necessary. Simple obedience to one of the commandments would have solved that dilemma for most folks, and I'm not talking about the sixth commandment, I'm talking about the seventh.

It has been said, and proven time and time again to be true, that we can't legislate morality. But we can preach it and we can live it. We can write God's law on our hearts, and if we have to post a poster to remember the Ten Commandments, we can do that, too.

I'm a member (honorary lifetime) of the Rotary Club. At the close of each meeting, we recite either from memory or from the back of the weekly bulletin the 4 Way Test, the basic code or law of Rotary.

Wonder if we recited the Ten Commandments every Sunday, like we do the Apostle's Creed, or another Affirmation of Faith, if we'd remember? Or remembering, would we obey? Or would it be like the speed limit on I-10, something that everybody knows and everybody ignores?

Wonder if there will come a day when God's laws, all of them, are as long forgotten as they were in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah? Wonder if that day is already past?

The Israelites heard the word of the Lord, the long forgotten law, wept, celebrated, and began again to honor God by keeping God's law. Having lost the scrolls, they became the people who preserved the scrolls, the people known as the People of the Book.

Wonder how history will remember our generations?

Let us pray.

Lord, sometimes we forget. But mostly, we just ignore. Forgive us, and renew in us a spirit of obedience, through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.