

WORKING WITH THE GRAIN

Practicing (for) the Kingdom: Law and Confession
Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 22:34-40; 1 John 5:2-5

The more I ponder the practices of Christian worship,
the more I realize how *strange* it is,
what we Christians do every week when we get together.

Strange, that is, from the perspective of the world we live in
the rest of the week.

Strange, in the eyes of the culture we have all been steeped in.
Strange, odd, radical, counter-cultural.

That's what Christian worship *is*,
when you step back from it for even a moment,
and examine it.

And that's true *especially* when it comes to the practices
we're focusing on today—
the Law and the Confession.

I should start by simply clarifying what I mean by Law and Confession.

Confession: We pretty much know what *that* means in worship.
We engage in the public practice of confession fairly *often* here.
Not *every* Sunday, but *many*.

But it may *not* be so clear what practice of worship I'm referring to,
when I say "the Law."

Now, if you look at your order of worship for today,

I'm sure you could all point out which part was "the Law."

We all read, in *unison*, the Ten Commandments.

Clearly, we were reciting the law.

But we hardly ever *do* that.

Only if the designated scripture of the day is Exodus 20.

Sometimes we have a reading

from one of the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah,
which is sometimes called the Law.

But *that's* not really what I'm talking about.

I'm talking about something larger than any one text.

The "law" is that point in the service where we hear spoken,
"God's will for our lives."

Worship, as we've said, is a dialogue.

We're here to give God our praise, our adoration,
our prayers of submission.

And God *replies!*

Through scripture, primarily,
but also through the voice of prophets among us,
God speaks back to us.

We hear, *publicly*, God's invitation to obedience.

Speaking of being *counter-cultural!*

The concepts of law and obedience are not, shall we say,
the most popular of religious ideas in our culture.

As soon as people start throwing around language like,
obeying God's law,
almost *inevitably* we start hearing the word "sin,"
and, Lord *knows*, *that's* not a word we're very keen on.

Not long ago, I was leading a worship service in a public setting,
not *here*, but I won't say where,

and I read some scripture that included the word "sin,"
and even though I didn't mention the word
in my following comments,

someone came up to me afterward,
who specifically identified herself as *not* a Christian,
and asked me rather pointedly,

"So why do you pastors always have to bring 'sin'
into the picture?"

Is that some sort of *requirement*?

I thought we'd gotten *over* all that sin-stuff."

Not everyone out there is that blunt about it,
but I dare say, she pretty accurately captured
the way our culture looks at

God's law and sin and confession.

Any religious language that puts restrictions on our personal freedom,
is an insult to a culture that worships independence,
self-determination, individual choice, and privacy in all things.

But having said that,
there's good reason our culture reacts against "sin talk."
There are far too many cases of spiritual abuse we know of,
in distant and recent history—
extreme examples like Reformation-Era execution of heretics,
and the Salem witch trials,
and some current religious cults,
to more *moderate* examples like
the Amish practice of shunning family members,
or other authoritarian groups—
and not only *Christian* groups—
that force their members to submit to the party line.
It's no surprise our culture reacts strongly
against the notion of religious law, and obedience.
And we Christians should rightly distance ourselves
from such misuse and abuse of authority.

But that does *not* mean we do away with the notion
that God *has* a law to obey.
Why would we *want* to throw away law?
God's law is a great gift to us.
Our Jewish friends have a lot to teach us in this regard.
As God's beloved children, we should embrace, with gratitude,
the gift of God's law.
To ditch the whole concept of law, sin, and confession,
just because it's been abused,
is an insult and a snub to God,
who graciously hands it to us as a gift.

That's why we read 1 John 5 this morning.
It makes a direct connection between God's law, and God's love.
"For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.
And his commandments are not burdensome."
Obedience . . . and love. One signifies the other.

I found it helpful to read James K. A. Smith's treatment of this issue
in his book *Desiring the Kingdom*,
which, in part, inspired this worship series.
Smith says the law is *not* intended to restrict our human potential.

It is protective, not restrictive.
The commandments are like guardrails along the highway.
They reassure us. They give us a sense of security, of comfort.
When our lives are "rightly ordered," we have peace and rest.

There's a famous line in a prayer of St. Augustine,
"You have made us for yourself . . .
our hearts are restless until they find rest in you."

That's the Gospel truth. The radical, counter-cultural, gospel truth
that we affirm every time we engage in the worship practice
of reciting God's law.

We've been created by God for a purpose.
Our lives have an end.
And by that I mean, a goal toward which our lives are aimed.
A purpose.
The technical term is *telos*, T-E-L-O-S.
You might know that word,
if you've studied some philosophy or theology.
But I want you *all* to understand it,
because I'm going to use it this morning.
Telos is a Greek word that means
the end of a goal-oriented process.
If I just use the word "end" that means too many things.
Telos is more precise.
It means the purpose *toward* which we move in our lives.
Our *telos* is a purpose given to us at creation.
Not one we invented ourselves.

That's what makes worship so counter-cultural.
Here we speak of a *telos* that we did *not* design for ourselves.

That's a radically different way to talk.
Western culture today is *profoundly* shaped
by a late-modern philosophical framework,
that's all about forming us to be autonomous beings.
In *other words*, the culture we live in encourages us
to believe we are a law unto ourselves

(provided we don't infringe on somebody *else's* right to be law unto *themselves*).

Our dominant culture has taught us very well the definition of freedom:

Freedom is not *only* about being able to choose our own way of living in this world, to choose our means.

Freedom, we're told, means being able to choose our own *ends*, to choose our *telos*.

According to Smith, our culture, shaped largely by modernity rejects the idea that "there is a specified, normative end to which humanity ought to be directed in order to enjoy the good life." (175)

Here in the West we equate freedom with a *pure* freedom of choice—
"freedom to construct our own ends and to invent our own visions of the good life." (175)

Even to *suggest* there is a moral law *outside* ourselves is a scandal to us who've had our longings and desires deeply shaped by modern western culture.

So gathering as a body in Christian worship, and hearing God's law articulated in so many words, in an exercise in reshaping our desires *away* from this deep desire to be autonomous and self-directed, and toward a desire to belong to God.

In worship, we are confronted with a radically different vision of the good life. To quote Smith, in worship we are reminded that "humanity and all of creation *flourish* when they are rightly ordered to a *telos* that is not of their own choosing but rather is stipulated by God. Creation is created *for* something, *for* a particular end envisioned by the Creator." (175-176)

We believe God the Creator did *not* put the universe together randomly. There is an ordered intentionality to Creation.

Just as wood cut from a tree has a grain that runs in a certain direction, so the universe has a grain.

In working with wood, or working with life, it makes a difference whether we are working *with* the grain or *against* the grain.

John Howard Yoder, referring to Christ's command that we should take up our cross and follow, once wrote that, "People who bear crosses are working with the grain of the universe."

Hearing the law spoken, as a practice of Christian worship, is like picking up a piece of lumber, and examining the grain. It orients us. It helps us see the guard rails, the highway markers. And it's a marvelous gift of God's grace.

Of course, in so *hearing* the law, we are also chastened. In several ways.

One, because we are so deeply formed by these competing desires for autonomy and independence. So hearing the law reminds us that we are *not* our own, as we have long been told by our culture, and as we have come to believe.

We belong to another, and were bought with a price.

Two, it shines a burning light on our failures.

We are reminded of our sin, of where we have transgressed God's law.

And *three*, not only does it remind of our sin, it reminds us that on our own, we are unable to do otherwise.

And that is why we practice confession in Christian worship. It's a way of choosing . . . *against* culture . . . to openly acknowledge our transgressions,

where we run against the grain of the universe,
to own up to our inability to love God with all our
heart, soul, mind, and strength.

We confess both our sinful *actions*,
and our sinful *bent*.

We admit that our desires have become disordered,
and therefore our actions are disordered.

We concede that we have violated God's trust.

In the communal worship practice of confession,
we are not *only* confessing our individual transgressions,
we acknowledge our complicity
with all sorts of evil that disorders the world and creation.

I've heard some people criticize corporate confession in worship,
because it's putting meaningless words in our mouths,
if we're not *truly* confessing specific sins
that we ourselves are personally responsible for.

While I appreciate the concern to keep things *personal*,
I don't think they get the main point of the practice.

Confession is a way to re-orient ourselves,
after culture's *dis*-orientation.
It's to re-order ourselves according to God's law.
It's to assume a different posture than our culture encourages.
The posture encouraged by our choir anthem today—
"Bow down low, and bend your head."

That's counter-cultural in a world shaped more by the
pop psychology of Oprah and the *other* Dr. Phil,
and Joel Osteen,
and countless other evangelists of
head-held-high self-confidence,
who tell their adoring fans,
"Believe in yourself!"
"Get over your guilt and get in the game!"
"Choose to be positive . . . make your dreams come true!"

We are taught to rid ourselves of "negative energy"
anything that compromises self-esteem,
and replace it with "do-it-yourself" confidence and self-affirmation.

On the *one* hand, our culture is right.

We *need* to love and respect ourselves
in order to be healthy and whole persons.
And some persons *especially*, wounded by abuse,
need to learn *how* to love themselves.

Endless and needless self-condemnation,
is not only destructive and unhealthy,
but a miserable way to live.

But . . . pop psychology only has half the picture.
They offer assurance, *without* the confession.
Self-confidence, *without* an honest accounting.

The Christian practice of confession
embraces both as necessary for our wholeness.
Confession *starts* with being honest about our sin,
and our sinfulness,
and expresses our need for God.

But *then* there is an announcement and assurance
of God's pardon—absolution and forgiveness offered in Christ.
It's a dialogue between us and God.
We confess our sins, and God answers with full forgiveness.

Assurance does *not* grow out of self-confidence,
or out of what we are able to accomplish by trying harder,
getting over it, getting in the game.
Our brokenness is met by God's grace,
and we are transformed.
God empowers us to reshape our desires
toward the *telos* God created for us,
and *away* from the disordered *telos*
where we, in our sin, got trapped and entangled.

In this practice of Christian worship
where we bow in humble confession before God,

and acknowledge our brokenness and our need,
we are not left in despair.
We do not remain hopeless.
Confession and assurance gives us hope.
It reminds us that God, in Christ,
has already broken *into* our disordered creation.
The reordering of creation has already begun,
and we are part of that.
The practice of confession is truly, and deeply,
liberating.
It's what we know about true freedom,
that the rest of the world has not yet discovered.

So, in response, I invite us to engage in this ancient, and necessary,
practice of Christian worship.

Turn in your hymnal to #144, a music setting of the "Kyrie."
The words, "Kyrie eleison" or the English, "Lord, have mercy,"
is the most basic, yet deep, prayer of confession.
It echos the prayer of the tax collector
in Jesus' story of the two men praying in the temple.
The one who prayed, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner,"
went away forgiven and restored.

So we will all sing that simple prayer of confession,
interspersed among the words of the classic Christian confession
from the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*, which I will read.
Let's begin by singing.

"*Kyrie, eleison . . .*"

Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.

"*Kyrie, eleison . . .*"

We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.

"*Kyrie, eleison . . .*"

We are truly sorry and we humbly repent,

for the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
"*Kyrie, eleison . . .*"
that we may delight in your will,
and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.
"*Kyrie, eleison . . .*"

And now, may the Almighty and merciful Lord
grant you absolution and remission of all your sins,
true repentance, amendment of life,
and the grace and consolation of his Holy Spirit. Amen.

—*Phil Kniss, January 30, 2011*