

Law or Faith

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
March 1, 2024 – Morning Worship with Communion on the 3rd Sunday of Lent
Text: Romans 4:13-25

As you are well aware, if you keep up with the news on any level, our country is in the throes of a unique moment in our history and the history of democracy around the world. This situation is incredibly complex and has taken at least eight decades to evolve to the point at which it stands today. I have no interest in discussing the political issues and divisions at play in all this although I am sure we could have a very robust conversation. But this is neither the time nor the place for that discussion, at least not the political side of it. That being said, there is still much we can and should reflect on together as we negotiate these historical times in which we live. I wonder every day what historians will be saying about our chapter in future history books. Obviously, we can't know since this moment is unfolding with us in the middle of it. All we can do is keep in mind the ancient Chinese curse: "May you live in interesting times." Easy to see why it's considered a curse. "Enough with the interesting already!! We're ready for normal again." This is what we think. Unfortunately, I'm pretty sure the "normal" ship has already sailed, and we're left standing on the shore waving at it.

Case in point. As many of you know, I am a proud graduate of Harvard Divinity School. I loved my three years at Harvard. Honestly, it was like a three year sabbatical as I had the freedom to indulge my love of books and reading and writing and incredibly in-depth conversations with some of the brightest minds in the world. It was this experience that taught me both the challenges and blessings of a truly diverse community as the students and faculty at Harvard come from all over the globe. The seated faculty is also incredibly diverse and added to that are a constant stream of "fellows" coming to

teach or do research or both for periods ranging from six months to two years. The student body, undergraduate (called the “Yard”) and the graduate schools, are incredibly diverse as well drawing students from across the world, from every socio-economic class and every imaginable culture and religious background. What all these folks, students and faculty, have in common is that they are all very intelligent, at least academically. Some of them lack a bit of, shall we say, real world experience or, put in simpler terms, common sense. Many of them come to Harvard from repressive societies at home meaning their time at Harvard can be the first time in their lives when they can actually say what they think, when they can ask questions that would land them in prison in their home countries, when they can become friends with people totally different from themselves. This is the magic of a school like Harvard but with that magic also comes the curse of what can happen when all those different voices and forces clash.

This is what happened when huge protests broke out on the Harvard campus immediately following the October 7 attack in Israel by Hamas which resulted in the deaths of over 1200 Israeli citizens, many of them violently murdered in their own homes. 250 hostages were also taken by Hamas and, while some have been released, many are still being held. What followed this attack has been an explosion of violence in Gaza as Israel retaliates against the Hamas terrorists now hiding amidst the Palestinian population, as it defends its interests and territory. It is worth noting that the estimated death toll of Palestinians since October 7 is over 30,000. All this violence has been accompanied by an explosion of protests at many universities like Harvard around the world.

Let me explain at this point that my purpose in this conversation is not to rehash any of the rhetoric unleashed by all sides of this mess,

from Israeli leadership to Hamas terrorists to political pundits blue and red to protestors around the world. That is way beyond the scope of this or any sermon. In fact, I am pretty confident more than a few doctoral dissertations on this topic are already underway at Harvard and Yale and Cambridge and the Sorbonne and other universities globally. This is their job, their role in society – to recognize a seminal moment in history and then analyze the heck out of it trying to figure out what caused it, why did it happen now, is there a right and wrong side and, most importantly, how will it affect the world moving forward. This is also what I'm interested in this morning because I want us to consider more deeply the relationship between the law and faith and ironically this situation at Harvard is just such an issue.

All people of faith confront the question of the relationship between law and faith every day but most of the time we're not aware of it. At least that used to be the case until recently as the rise of the radical Religious Right and Christian Nationalism have forced their way to the center of political discourse in this country. Again, a history lesson for another time. What I'd like us to reflect on together this morning is the most ancient version of this tension between law and faith as articulated by Paul in this morning's text from Romans. This is one of the letters that scholars agree was actually written by Paul from Rome sometime during the reign of Emperor Nero from 54-68 CE. The particular section we read today is where Paul dives into the tension between the Old Testament texts, particularly those of the Torah considered the "law," and the teachings of Jesus. He uses the story of Abraham, the father of three great world religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – as the basis of his discussion about this ongoing tension he perceives between adherence to the Law as central to the practice of faith as opposed to Jesus' teaching that the central role of faith itself is key to living one's life transformed by the

faith one professes. In an ingenious argument, Paul points out that Abraham, who is considered the father of Judaism, acted on a promise from God that he would “inherit the world through his descendants.” This promise is what drove Abraham and Sarah out of their homes when they were in their 90’s to follow God to an entirely new place. This promise is why they trusted when God promised and then blessed them with a son Isaac in their old age. Faith in God, and not the Law as embodied in the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments, is what drove Abraham forward and changed the world. Paul describes the faith of Abraham in this way: “No distrust made him waiver concerning the promise of God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. Therefore his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.”

“His faith was reckoned to him as righteousness.” So Paul is telling us that it was Abraham’s faith that enabled him to trust so completely in the promises God made to him. It was not adherence to the Law as enshrined in the Ten Commandments or the other legal texts of the Torah. It was just deep and pure faith in God. This is also critical to our understanding of who Jesus is as Christians. Our faith proclaims that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Law as outlined in great detail in the Hebrew Scriptures. Our faith teaches us that by the time Jesus arrived on the scene, the Judaism set in motion by Abraham’s faith had become a rigid system of adherence to Temple regulations and the Law as set forth in the scriptures as the means to lay a firm foundation to one’s faith. As Jesus saw the Temple Judaism of this time, a relationship with a living, breathing God was no longer central to the practice of faith. It had been reduced to a system of rituals and sacrifice tightly controlled by a Temple hierarchy which was too often corrupt by its cozy relationship with Rome. We often forget that Jesus’ original purpose was to reform the Judaism of his

time, not to found a whole new religion. That happened after his death, as what became known as Christianity evolved on its own, parallel to the Jewish communities.

So where does this leave *us* in this situation we face in the world today? Why is this analysis by Paul in his letter to the church in Rome so important for our reflection? To me, it's important because it points out so directly what happens when the letter of the law replaces the righteousness of the heart. Let's return to our example of the protests at Harvard. Several key points here:

1. The violent protests at Harvard on October 7 were kicked off by a statement from several student body groups who released a public statement that “the Israeli regime was entirely responsible’ for Hamas’s murders and hostage taking.”¹
2. This understandably upset the Jewish student community as well as the substantial body of Jewish alumni of Harvard. Following the statement by the student groups, a wave of antisemitic actions swept through Harvard, so bad that many Jewish students felt too unsafe to attend classes.
3. The university administration, under the direction of then President Claudine Gay, responded to this situation in a less than robust way due in large part to the desire to preserve “free speech” as a hallmark of the university. This quickly revealed itself to be a very bad idea.
4. When she and several other Ivy League university presidents were called to testify before the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, she once again tried to clarify her position that “such speech is hateful but that violations of the [Harvard code of conduct] policy depend on speech crossing over into conduct.”²

This is where the whole thing went off the rails for a second time, resulting in President Gay’s resignation. There were other factors at play as well which are equally important but for our purposes this morning, I want us to stay focused on President Gay’s persistent insistence that the horrific antisemitic speech which was so central to the protests on campus and terrified Jewish students there and at other colleges across the country had to be understood within context before they could be widely condemned by the university under its

¹ John S. Rosenberg, “A Presidency’s End,” *Harvard Magazine*, March-April 2024, p. 15

² Ibid.

own free speech policies. This was not a good response. Turns out that President Gay had been prepped by attorneys for the University prior to the hearing and as a result her testimony was “legally right”³ but tone deaf. A commentary in the *New York Times* rightly pointed out that the attorneys had prepared her for a deposition instead of a public hearing before a hostile congressional committee and the moment was blown. As the author of that commentary, Jeannie Suk Gerson, noted, “the moment plainly needed a moral statement rather than a legally precise reply.”⁴ Put another way, given our reflections on the law and faith this morning, President Gay should have spoken from her heart and not hidden behind the law. As a result she, and Harvard, were profoundly damaged in the eyes of the public around the world when she had the opportunity to denounce the hatred and antisemitism displayed on campus on October 7 and afterward, and did not take it.

This left me, and thousands of others, profoundly disappointed in President Gay and the Harvard Board of Overseers. When they had a chance to issue a black and white statement condemning hatred and violence no matter the source, they hid behind the law. Essentially the “free speech” core value of the university had been weaponized by the protestors and the elite leadership of Harvard failed to notice it until it was too late. As a result statements issued fell fall short of what should have been said. This, dear ones, is a perfect example of what happens when one hides behind the law instead of responding from the righteousness which comes from faith in a God who embodies and enacts love. An additional irony here is that the perpetrators of this whole mess on Harvard’s campus and elsewhere, as well as the Jewish

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

students who were the targets of the protest along with the nation of Israel itself, claimed to be acting out of their religious identities. This is most likely true however, I would point out that a religious identity is not at all the same thing as having a deep and transformative personal relationship with a living, loving God. As Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans, following the law – even if it is understood to be God’s law – does not automatically make one a person of faith. Living a righteousness life as described in Psalm 19 which we read as our Call to Worship this morning – this is what makes one a person of faith, a person who knows they are beloved of God and are loving and kind to others as a result.

So what are we to make of all this in our own lives? How does this particular mess of our current realities in the world reveal to us something central to our own lives of faith on this Third Sunday of Lent? Well, no surprise that I refer us back to Jesus’ own words as we reflect together on how good intentions can go so horribly wrong. In the Gospel of Matthew we are told the story of one of the times when Jesus was once again having a “discussion” with the religious leaders of the Temple known as the Pharisees. They asked him a question, “Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matthew 22:36-40)

Love God. Love the other. That is the nature of faith, of our relationship with God. At least, that’s what Jesus tells us. And that, dear ones, is good enough for me. I’d like to end this morning by reading a statement released this week by the leadership of the United Church of Christ at both the Conference and National level. It is a

“Statement of Prayer and Concern for Palestine and Israel.” [*Read prayer.*] Amen.