

Grace and peace are yours through God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I continue to share an essential Lutheran concept of the Law and its two functions; to accuse/condemn and to preserve life. In the Gospel text today, both functions are clearly displayed in the actions of the Pharisees and in the words of Jesus. At the heart of the gospel message is the interpretation of the Law; we know that Jesus came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill the Law. Love is at the heart of His actions and the result is 'life is preserved'. The Pharisees do not act out of love, so in the absence of love their actions are simply to accuse and condemn.

God granted the Tribe of Levi (one of the 12) the responsibilities to maintain priestly duties within the nation of Israel. God also gave them the responsibility to interpret the Law for the sake of civil order and above all things, preserving life; life-together. As we see in the gospel text, interpretation of the Law is everything.

My friends, the Law is not meant to be a burden and proclaiming the Good News does not have to be something that creates concern for us. If we act out of love for one another, God will provide and the Spirit will do the rest.

With careful research and the assistance of a renowned attorney, leader, and friend (known to us all), let's take a new look at the Law in the context of a landmark case from 78 years ago. A case, until now, we all think we know very well. I ask you to open your eyes, ears and hearts and consider the functions of the Law: to condemn or to preserve life.

The case details are a dog-named Toto who bit Almira Gulch in Twister County, in the state of Kansas. Almira Gulch is an upstanding and law-abiding citizen who expects her neighbors to do the same. When she became a victim of others who broke the law, she demanded justice and obtained a court order issued by Sheriff Charlie Farley, to have Toto placed on death row and scheduled for immediate execution.

The law functions clearly for Toto and Almira. First, it accuses Toto of breaking the law and protects life by removing this risk from society. Further details of the case reveal Dorothy provides a sworn affidavit that Almira Gulch intentionally scared Toto and he responded in self-defense. Emma Gale (Dorothy's Auntie Emm) also provides a sworn affidavit that Almira Gulch feels that she owns the entire county... and the last twenty three years she has wanted to tell her a "few things", but being a Christian woman she couldn't say them.

Finally, the will to survive engages with Toto too as he takes a leap of faith from the basket on Miss Gulch's bicycle and runs to the safety and comfort of Dorothy's arms. This is the information as recorded in the archives. However, our honorable attorney shares a new interpretation. In other words; the rest of the story.

First, the dog is not the accused. Almira Gulch obtained a *ex parte order*, which means that the court heard only her side of the story. Dorothy is the accused; she is the owner and responsible party for the allegedly dangerous dog. Under usual circumstances she would be entitled to appear in court to answer Almira's complaint. That would be the first appearance only, and set down for a trial thereafter, unless the litigants reached a stipulation in court.

Second, courts are very reluctant to 'issue an order' having heard only one side of the story due to possible exaggeration or misinformation. It is much more likely that the court would have set a very early date for Dorothy and Almira to appear in court for trial on the issues. If Almira had established that her injury was serious, the court might have entered a temporary order requiring that the dog could be confined until the facts are presented.

Third, a judgment to hand down a death sentence is extreme and there is a common legal saying that every dog is entitled to one bite. Now, if the bite is severe, that may not hold. However, since Almira is well enough to be pedaling a bicycle to a rural location during bad weather, it was probably just a nip. Now, there are three

recognized defenses against dog bites: 1. I don't own a dog. 2. I own a dog, but it did not bite you. 3. I own a dog. It bit you, but you were not injured.

According to our expert, we don't even know where the incident took place. It's unlikely Dorothy was taking one of Emm's blue ribbon pies to Almira at her home or anywhere else. So, was she bitten on the Gale's farm? If so, there is clearly no affection between Emm, Henry and Dorothy toward Almira, so she was probably not invited. Was Almira in fact trespassing? And was the dog defending the property or its family? Exactly what was Almira up to?

Finally, Almira delivered the court order herself. The law does not permit 'service of process' by the involved parties, as the risk of shenanigans is too great. Clearly, she would never be permitted to seize the dog.

Now humor is added here not only to make a point, but also to leave a memory that Law and Gospel are present in all human life together. However, unlike the provisions within the *Dogs That Annoy Fine People Act*, there are no provisions to the commands God gives us. We are the ones requesting the provisions to God's Law and the ones who seek a 'way-out' when we are accused. The truth is, there is no way out. God's Law is absolute and leaves no room for negotiation or refute. Plain and simple, we are guilty of sin if not by our actions then by our very thoughts as Auntie Emm openly confesses there are things she 'wants to say'.

My dear friends, I have a feeling you will remember the message today, but I pray that you remember that our Lord Jesus Christ came not to abolish but to fulfill the Law; He uses the Law not to condemn us but to preserve our life. God acted towards us out of love; a love so great, a love so pure, a love that is so complete that our life, protection, and joy is eternally secured.

The gospel text reveals the Law being interpreted in both ways; to condemn and to preserve life. The means of interpretation also reveals the intent of the heart. Where no love exists and only obedience is required, grace and mercy will not be found. When love is at the heart of our words, there is no condemnation, but the grace and mercy are extended allowing life to continue.

God gave the Levites the responsibility to 'safe keep' the Law and the priestly-ways for the sake of life-together. As history reveals, Israel became so distant and removed from the Law that God allowed them to lose all they had and become exiles again. After the Babylonian captivity, and some time later, the Pharisees would be formed to protect the Law in the strictest sense and to require its full observance to ensure a relationship with God would never again be severed. However, as our gospel text reveals, there was no love at the heart of their words and actions; there was only obedience for the sake of preserving 'their' way of life.

Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath who was not disobedient to the Law in any way, He is the perfect Lamb of God who willingly took upon Him our sins and died, so we might be free of the debt and price of sin. Jesus is Lord of Life, our personal Saviour who acted out of full obedience to God to preserve our eternal life. Jesus is the Lord of Love who fulfilled the Law so we are free to serve and love one another as we have first been loved.

My friends, it is not easy to love everyone; especially when we are asked to love those who hurt, marginalize, exploit, steal from, lie about, and treat us unfairly. And still, Jesus commands us to love one another because we are truly loved by God first. There will always be people to interpret the Law, but might I suggest as Children of the same Heavenly Father that we; **Love first, then ask questions later!**

For it is only with love that we will know the peace that passes all understanding to keep our hearts and minds through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.