

Love is the Law

*A homily preached by Jennifer A. Hudson at the Celtic Eucharist, St. Paul's on the Green Episcopal Church, February 9, 2016*

April 1995. I was a senior in high school and preparing a presentation on the criminal justice system for my American Government class. We had a family friend who was a prosecutor at Bridgeport Superior Court, so it seemed natural that I interview him for my project. I remember shadowing this prosecutor for an entire day—meeting his colleagues, exploring the courthouse, spending more time behind the scenes than a law student. Nothing could have prepared me, though, for sitting in on and watching the arraignments, where inmates were raised into a metal cage and each man inside the cage was read a date for his trial, as if already receiving a sentence. Most of the men in the cage looked like ones you or I wouldn't want to mess with—burly, some tattooed, grim expressions in their eyes and on their faces. The idea that any of them could be someone's father, brother or son didn't occur to me. I saw each as an outlaw, someone who'd been, to use the words of Peter from our first reading, “carried away with the error of the lawless.” In my eyes they'd lost their “own stability,” to use Peter's words again, having been brought to this point—an arraignment—in the first place. How could I, a naïve eighteen-year-old, see these men, with hands and feet shackled, as anything other than inmates, existing on the margins of the lawful and the lawless?

Tonight's readings have an awful lot to say about the law. And it's interesting to think that Jesus comes close in tonight's Gospel from Mark to the men I saw in that courthouse on Golden Hill Street. We see a Jesus who lived on the margins: the Pharisees wanted to get rid of him because he led people away from strict obedience of the Law. Meanwhile, the Herodians feared losing the luxuries of Roman life that were made possible by taxes if Jesus led a revolt. So Jesus is

caught between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, if Jesus says “don’t pay the tax,” he’ll be arrested for treason. If he says “pay the tax,” the Pharisees will call him a traitor and will convict him of heresy. Whatever answer Jesus gives, he faces arrest and being charged with lawlessness. But Jesus uses his smarts. He knows both the Pharisees and the Herodians are trying to trick him, so he says, if Caesar’s image is on that coin, then it’s his, but whatever has God’s image is God’s.

The Good News is that we all, as God’s creation, bear God’s image, therefore we all belong to God. Caesar included. The inmates awaiting their trials at Golden Hill too. God excludes no one from radical welcome and love. Love is God’s law. It’s the guiding force of the universe and it trumps all human laws. God commanded it to Moses on two tablets and Jesus further directed it. May we direct others in that law of love and, in doing so, heal a broken world.