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“God’s Law vs. God’s Grace.”

When we witness, or even experience, conflict within the modern Christian Church, one only has to see our reading from St. Paul’s letter to the Christians in Ephesus, to realize that it’s always been that way, and that it will likely always remain that way.

But what makes so many of those conflicts both interesting and exasperating, is the fact that both sides will frequently make ample use of Scripture to support their positions. For me, that has always begged the question: How can two groups debating the opposite sides of an issue, go to the same Bible — and sometimes even to the exact same Bible passages — and come up with completely different positions? How is that even possible?

Well, we might find an answer to that puzzle, by going to the first chapter of John’s gospel, and finding the seventeenth verse, where he writes:

“The law indeed was given through Moses; [but] grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

It's a fairly cryptic statement, but I think the author was trying to let us know that there was a conflict within his own community, over the nature and character of God.

That is, on the one side, there were those who believed that the *laws*, which God had given to his people through Moses, were what most clearly described the nature and character of God.

But on the other side of the conflict, were those who believed that the *grace*, which had been revealed in Jesus, was what best described the nature and character of God.

And if you think about it, it's a classic match-up: Scripture and tradition on one side, versus experience and reason on the other. Or, to describe it using the author's own words, it was a conflict between law and grace.

One of the first law-versus-grace conflicts in the early church, was between Peter and Paul.

Peter's base of operations was in Jerusalem, and most of his converts to Christianity came from the Jewish population of that region. Peter required his converts to submit to the ancient practice

of circumcision — as prescribed in the law — before they could be baptized into the Church.

Paul’s ministry, however, was principally to non-Jews, and for them circumcision was a much harder sell, and so, eventually, Paul just abandoned it altogether. (“Thank you, Paul!”)

And so, when Peter and Paul finally got together, and argued about who’s practice was right, Peter could accurately say, “The requirement for circumcision is in Scripture, and it’s what we’ve always done.” And Paul could respond, “Well, we haven’t been doing that, and God’s grace has still blessed our congregations with great success. Therefore, we’ve concluded that circumcision is no longer necessary.”

I really love that story — and you can find it in the fifteenth chapter of Acts — but what makes it so interesting to me, is the fact that *both* Peter and Paul were essentially correct. Even though each had a different theological approach to their ministry — even though they did things differently, and they differed in their beliefs about what was right and what was not — each was arguably doing the right thing.

And so, this brings me to the first thing I want to say about law-versus-grace situations: There is probably no situation where we should try to rely exclusively upon either law or grace, because in the end, each can serve to temper the other.

Back when I was still serving a parish in Kansas, I also spent many years as a member of the Commission on Ministry for the Diocese of Kansas. We were the group of people who interviewed and screened candidates for ordination.

Now, there are a lot of criteria that people have to meet before they are interviewed by the Commission; one is a rule that says that a candidate must have been Confirmed at least a year before being interviewed. It was a sensible rule, that was intended to prevent people — who had no real experience or understanding of the Episcopal Church — to prevent them from pursuing a position of ordained leadership within it.

Well, one day we were interviewing a particular candidate. He had been a member of his parish for about a dozen years; he had served in many lay leadership positions, including Senior Warden; and on paper he looked like an excellent candidate. That is, until someone on the Commission noticed that he had been Confirmed

only about six months earlier. All of a sudden there ensued a very tense discussion.

On one side were those who said there was nothing more to talk about; the man hadn't been Confirmed for a year, and so we have to reject his application.

On the other side were those who said there was a lot to talk about; this man was clearly not the sort of candidate the rule was designed to screen out; and that, even though the *letter* of the law hadn't been observed, the *spirit* of the law certainly had been.

Well, we went back and forth for quite a while until a majority of the Commission finally voted to reject the man's application. I thought that was a sad day for the Commission, because I didn't think there was a lot of grace in their decision.

And this brings me to the second thing I want to say about law versus grace situations, and it has to do with why law and grace need each other:

Without grace, law can easily descend into tyranny; but without law, grace can easily descend into anarchy.

One of my brothers has three sons. When those boys were very young, it seemed to me that my brother and his wife were heavy into grace, and not so much into law. (Translation: There didn't seem to be a lot of boundary enforcement.) Now, maybe there really was more balance, but it didn't seem that way to me. All I really knew was that those three little boys were no fun to be around; they seemed perpetually to be out of control. And if there was going to be a family gathering, I sometimes found myself hoping that they wouldn't be able to attend. Now, I feel bad for having said all that, but I can tell you that all three of those little boys grew into outstanding young men. (But I still don't know how!)

And so, the point I'm trying to make with my two examples, is that law and grace really do need each other. And they need to be present in a fairly equal balance. And when that happens, the world is a wonderful place!

In 1988, the Summer Olympics were held in Seoul, South Korea. Representing Canada, in the sailing competition, was a man named Larry Lemieux.

One day, two boat races were being held in the same general vicinity, when the wind suddenly increased from 15 to 35 knots. In one of the races, the two competitors from Singapore were thrown into the rough water; they were injured, and unable to right their damaged boat.

Meanwhile, in the other race, Lemieux was sailing alone near the halfway point in his race, and he was in second place. When he saw the capsized crew, Lemieux broke away from his course and sailed to them. And he waited with them until a rescue boat could transport the two sailors to shore. Lemieux then resumed his race, where he finished in 22nd place. However, soon after the race, the jury of the International Yacht Racing Union unanimously decided that Lemieux should be awarded second place, the position he was in when he went to the aid of the Singapore crew. I've always thought their decision was a great example of law and grace in balance.

You know, there really have been a lot of conflicts within the Christian Church, and sometimes it seems like there is no way to resolve the differences. But maybe we can take a cue from the example set by Peter and Paul.

For quite a while, the two argued about who was right: Peter, who insisted that all converts be circumcised, and Paul, who disagreed. What I think eventually happened — and we can only surmise because the text is a bit light on the details — is that each finally stepped back to look at the bigger picture. At some point, Peter and Paul each finally realized that both were working towards the same goal — spreading the gospel and growing the community of faith — and instead of opposing each other they began to support each other. Peter gave Paul his blessing, and Paul began raising money to support Peter's efforts in Jerusalem.

Perhaps the church today, when it finds itself embroiled in the next conflict or controversy, might think about what Peter and Paul did to resolve their differences. Because, from their example, and many more, it becomes very clear that when law and grace are in balance, the world really is a beautiful place!

Amen.