

Sermon at St. Thomas, by Lynn E. Cunningham, June 17, 2007. 2 Samuel 11:26-12:10, 13-15; Galatians 2:11-21; Luke 7:36-50.

1. The summer season has finally started after a rough spring. We very nearly lost some of you.
2. What comfort and protection can I preach today as the St. Thomas community moves into summer? Melinda's sermon last Sunday taught something about wearing hats. Thank you, Melinda, for that sermon! In my earliest visits here, friends taught me always to wear a good hat for protection outdoors.
3. Paul talks about putting on the armor of faith, to help get through the rough times. Armor usually includes some kind of helmet for a hat.
4. Mary Ellen preached about the mystery of God as expressed through the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. I suggest today that embracing the mystery of the Trinity provides the kind of "hat" that Paul and Melinda taught about, a sheltering "hat", providing deep pastoral comfort for rough times.
5. Answer a basic question: Who is the ruler of the universe?
 - a. God! The God who created all the earth and all that is upon it, this God is the ruler of the universe! See the Book of Genesis
 - b. Living in a world where God created everything, where everything encountered comes from God, is comforting.
6. The Bible says that this same creating God is a God of rule making. See the Books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. God made rules for men and women to live by. The Ten Commandments; the Torah; the words of the prophets preaching justice for the poor, preaching reconciliation among the peoples.
7. Living in a world where there are rules, rules that make sense, where reality tends to follow those rules, is also comforting. No one wants to live in a chaotic world. Think of Iraq. God wills human beings to live within the comfort of sane rules.
8. Think of the Ten Commandments: Do not lie. Do not murder. Do not steal or commit adultery.
9. God, our God, is very much about rules, making rules to guide daily living.
10. Creator God and rule-making God: this is one God. This the Bible teaches.
11. Today's lessons show God's third aspect. God forgives deeply and compassionately when rules get broken. The three lessons are all about forgiveness, God's third aspect.
12. King David in the story in Second Samuel has committed a horrible crime. One day he observes from his balcony a naked woman bathing, Bathsheba. Desiring her immediately, he imagines her his wife, one many wives. He plots with his military commanders to send her husband, Uriah, back into battle, there to set him up and be killed in a skirmish with enemy soldiers.
13. How many of the Ten Commandments does King David violate? Every single one?
 - a. Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not lie, Thou shalt not commit adultery.
14. How does God, acting through his prophet Nathan, handle King David? Is King David immediately put to death, as the Biblical law required? No.
15. God punishes him, but also forgives him. Bathsheba goes on to become the mother of David's son and successor, King Solomon!
16. What ever happened to the sternness of God the rule-maker?
17. God the rule-maker takes on this other aspect, this forgiving aspect, in the Galatians passage as well.
18. Paul criticizes St. Peter for waffling back and forth about whether to follow the rules of the Jewish Torah, whether to require the new Gentile converts to Christianity to follow that sacred law, or whether to follow the path of salvation found through faith in Jesus Christ alone.
 - a. In effect Paul and Peter are engaging in a sharp debate about what it is that God the

rule-maker is requiring of his new Christian followers in order to be saved. Paul contends that Christianity is not about the old Jewish rules, but about faith in Jesus Christ.

19. Paul in his letter drives home the point that we are not saved by trying to follow the letter of the law, whatever the applicable law may be. We are not saved by condemning ourselves and others who fail to follow the laws, as inevitably happens.
 - a. Paul writes, “we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.” He writes, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.”
20. The third lesson, the Gospel passage, recounts a dinner party that the Pharisee Simon threw for Jesus. Here most clearly is the third aspect of God.
21. Simon is not a villain here. Simon as a Pharisee spent his life learning the traditional law of God as understood by Judaism. He likely obeyed carefully every one of the Ten Commandments, unlike King David.
22. On the other hand, the woman who crashes the party to be with Jesus, is not someone that you would ever want have in your home. She is bad news, a real sinner.
23. What kind of God would forgive her, in plain violation of God’s own rules?
24. Simon and the other members of the dinner party are shocked that Jesus forgives her. And not just forgives her, but Jesus rebukes Simon for being offended by Jesus’ generosity. Under the Torah, one person does not just forgive another person of a major sin. The law breaker must go to the Temple and go through a careful ritual atonement before God. Instead, Jesus forgives her directly, without requiring her to go through any ritual at the Temple.
25. What is going on here? Jesus IS God. He is not just some nice guy who comes in off the street casually uttering forgiveness to someone who is a grievous sinner. Jesus is one with the Ruler of the Universe. Jesus is one with the God who makes the rules in the first place. That is what Christianity teaches. Look at the words of the Nicene Creed.
26. What Jesus does here is momentous and revealing, as Simon and his dinner party perceive.
27. Do not be confused about the sinfulness of the woman in the Gospel story. The reader might think that this woman was just a minor sinner. Like maybe she had just been guilty of jaywalking.
28. The other persons at the dinner, including Simon, knew quite well that this was not an easily forgiven person. Think if you will about some of the people in Dubois who have a terrible reputation for having done bad things. Or, not to put too fine a point on this, think of your very own self at your worst, at some earlier point in your life. The woman was that bad. But just such forgiveness of her is what Jesus provides, Jesus the Son of God, Jesus who sits at the right hand of God.
29. Most people get the point about the Ruler of Universe laying down the rules for humans to follow. Most people get the point about God the creator of the universe. But what is this about God as Jesus, the Son of the Father, also bringing forgiveness for violations of the very rules that the rule-making God has laid down?
30. No wonder Simon the Pharisee missed this point about the nature of God. God the creating God, God the rule making God, is also God the deeply forgiving and loving God. If you ever start to forget this aspect of God, these stories, and especially the Gospel story, can be a reminder of this third aspect of God: God forgives you.
31. Mary Ellen in her sermon two weeks ago on Trinity Sunday reminded the congregation that the early Christian church, after years of reflection, debate, and sometimes harsh fighting, came to realize that the God who created the universe is the same God who came to reveal his righteous law to the people. That same God also came in Jesus Christ to reveal that forgiveness is as much in the nature of God, as God the law giver, and God the Creator. The Trinity doctrine is deeply comforting for these reasons.
32. The unity of God undergirds all that we ever discover God doing.

33. This God continues on to our own day as the Holy Spirit, always active in our lives to guide us in faith to come ever closer in love to God.
34. Recently I received a letter from a couple who wrote that they could not attend St. Thomas any more, as summer visitors, because it is part of a national church that does things which they do not approve of. They said they plan to attend a Presbyterian church over in Jackson, which they hoped would conform more closely to their understanding of what are God's moral laws.
35. And I wondered, in response to their letter, just what bible are they reading from? How sad that they seem to be seeking comfort in what they regard as the law, rather than in faith in Jesus Christ. How sad not to follow the teachings of Paul's theology! Where could there ever be a community or a church with everything done with righteousness, where everyone lives without sin? There is no comfort in seeking such a fantasy.
36. There is no such church. St. Thomas, I suggest, finds much deeper comfort through faith in Jesus Christ, a faith that will see us finally through to the pearly gates of heaven.
37. Wear, as for protection against rough times, the hat of faith that God is one God. One God who created the world out of fearful chaos. One God who makes rules to keep society from slipping into fearful chaos. One God offering loving forgiveness to all kinds of people, from the sinful woman to the Pharisee Simon. Not many different gods. One loving God, always drawing you to Himself!
38. In Jesus name, Amen!