Here are a few depressing statistics to get your Sunday off on the right foot. Deaths by drug overdose nearly tripled in adolescents between 2018 and 2022. Generation Z takes more sick days for mental health than any previous generation. Nearly one in four adults across the world reported feelings of loneliness in 2023. 12.5% of adult Americans have regular feelings of worry, nervousness, or anxiety. And finally, the number of suicides in the United States nearly doubled between 1980 and 2022. And while I readily admit these statistics are cherry picked and do not tell a full story they do indicate that there is something out of sorts in our current age. Yes, there has always been anxiety, loneliness and even suicide but something has happened to make it worse. It seems like we are experiencing the metaphorical equivalent of hyperacute transplant rejection -- there is a mismatch between individuals and the world in which they live. And as a result, we are left isolated and subject to a vast array of mental disorders. People seem ill-equipped to live their lives. And yes, I know that many who suffer from depression or suicidal thoughts have mitigating circumstances, like a family history of such things. But overall, these statistics tell us that something has gone south in the way we engage with life. There are a number of explanations. We have the rise of the internet, social media, twenty-four-hour news, Covid 19, Aaron Rogers as a possible Vice-Presidential candidate and so on. But you don’t come to church to hear me to ruminate on those topics so I want instead to focus on something of which I am mildly qualified to speak and that is what the Church can offer our hurting society.

As you know Christianity has been in retreat for some time in the United States. And since I seem to be on a roll with depressing statistics let me give you one more. In 2004, 44% of the U.S. adult population answered yes to the question, “have you attended church, synagogue, mosque or temple in the last seven days.” In 2023 that number dropped to 31%. Meaning 13% of the population or roughly 34 million people stopped regularly attending church in the past 19 or so years. Now before I get to my point, I want to be very clear and explain what I am not saying. I am not saying that every problem in the nation can be directly attributed to this fall in church attendance but I do believe that some of it can. And one of the reasons I say this has to do with the passage we have today from the prophet Jeremiah. In it God says, “I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord.” Part of the reason we read this passage today is because it foreshadows the coming of Jesus and the Holy Spirit but it also tells us something about how we are wired. God has placed something inside us that knows His laws. Sometimes we call this the conscience or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit but whatever we call it, we know that there is a voice inside us that can guide what we are to do and not do. That is, God’s law is not just something that is external but is also something that dwells within each of us.

This may not be a very good analogy but I think you are used to my mediocre analogies by now. Think of something mechanical like a sump pump. When we purchase one it generally comes with a manual that tells us things like how it is to be installed and maintained so as to function properly. However, these two items, the actual sump pump and the manual, are not unrelated. That is if you decide that no manual is going to tell you what to do and forgo maintaining the pump according to the standards of the manual you will soon find yourself with a basement full of water. And in thinking of it like this we can see similarities between God’s law and our day-to-day living. God’s law is not something separate from us but is rather part of us. And so to finish up my mediocre analogy when we go against God’s law we are like an improperly maintained sump pump, causing real damage to ourselves. Since we are created in God’s image it should come as no surprise that we are meant to act in certain ways in order to live what the young kids call our “best life.”

I started this sermon with a list of depressing statistics and as I said this was an attempt to show that something is not quite right with how people are living in the world. And I think part of the problem and what these statistics reflect is that we are trying to live in ways that are not in accord with God’s will. And strangely whenever something does go wrong, we double down on the secular wisdom that has gotten us into whatever predicament we are in, and are then surprised that it does not cure what ails us. Whether it is sex, consumerism, or politics we keep looking to find for rest for our souls in places that cannot provide it.

At my first parish I was involved in an incredibly heartbreaking situation. One of our wealthy parishioners was diagnosed with ALS. Obviously, it was devastating but her reaction made it even more heartbreaking. Despite both the Mayo Clinic and Houston Methodist reaching the same conclusion, she was convinced that the diagnosis was wrong and so went shopping for a better one. And sadly, in our fallen world it was not hard to find someone trafficking in false hope. She and her husband flew around the United Staes and Central America until they found the diagnosis they were looking for. If I remember correctly there was someone in Seattle who told her she had chronic Lyme Disease and a guy in Honduras who assured her that with some stem cell treatments in Tegucigalpa followed by heavy doses of his special medications she would be fully cured. I visited her a few days before she died and while there the quack in Honduras called to tell her that she was just about to turn the corner. And if you consider death a corner, I guess he was right. As you know I am not a doctor so you don’t need to take what I am about to say seriously but it is my opinion that all of the cures she found shortened her life by months or possibly even years. Sadly, I think this is metaphorically what much of our society is peddling. It sells false hope and gives us cures that only make the disease worse.

Whatever parts of God’s law you want to examine, whether it is loving our neighbor, forgiving others, or not bowing down to false gods, they are all in short supply today. And I think this is part of what is causing our angst. When we live in a world that tells us that not forgiving and hating those with whom we disagree is a virtue it should not seem strange that we are out of sorts. We have created false gods that do not lead to peace and good will towards men but rather increase the divides that keep us one from another. G. K. Chesterton said, “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.” But as difficult as it may be we are living in a world that is not even willing to try. All the non-Christian actions in which we engage have not ushered in the Age of Aquarius but only increased petty tribalism and existential strife. The statistics are there and the question becomes will we go against the trend and live in accordance with the laws written on our hearts by the Spirit so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.