

Law and Order and Love

Matthew 22:34-46

A man entered a store and walked up to the counter. The saleswoman who was behind the counter ignored him. The customer rang the bell on the counter to get her attention. The saleswoman said, "You got a number?" "I got a what?" asked the man. "You got a number?" the saleswoman repeated. "You gotta have a number." The man glanced around the store, which was empty, and replied, "Lady, I'm the only customer in the store! Why do I need to take a number?" But she insisted that he take a number before she would wait on him. It was obvious that she was more interested in following the rules than serving the customer. So the man took a number. It was number 37. The saleswoman looked at her number counter, which showed that the last customer who had been waited on was number 34. She called out, "Number 35...number 36...number 37." The man said, "I'm number 37." Without cracking a smile, the woman said, "May I help you?" This story is a perfect illustration of something known as legalism. Legalism is defined as a strict adherence to the letter of the law in a way that can nullify the spirit of the law.

According to the Gospels, the difference between faithfulness to the letter or the spirit of the Law was a source of friction between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day. Our Gospel reading this morning gets to the heart of this difference of opinion.

A religious scholar asked Jesus what he considered to be the most important law. There were two main forms of Law. First, there were the Ten Commandments. These ten are what is known as apodictic law. Apodictic law refers to timeless, divine commands – "thou shalt and thou shalt not." They are broad principles that are incontestably true. Sort of like what our own Declaration of Independence meant when it says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident."

There was another kind of law, called casuistic law. Casuistic Law applied the broad principles of apodictic law to specific, concrete situations. Casuistic Law evolved as questions arose about how to interpret the Commandments in the context of the complexities and ambiguity of real life. A good example would be the commandment to keep the Sabbath as a day set apart for rest. It didn't take long for people to ask how to define "rest" and what kind of work was permissible without violating the Sabbath. So, a whole bunch of laws became necessary to instruct people on what specific things you could or could not do to keep the one Commandment about Sabbath.

When you add up the apodictic and casuistic laws of the Hebrew Scriptures, there are a total of 613 commandments. One commandment had a special place among all the others, though. It was called the Shema. The Shema was recited daily at synagogue services to express the Jewish people's faith in and love of God. The Shema went like this: "Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." All the commandments were to be taken seriously and kept faithfully. But the Shema described the founding principle of the whole Law.

In response to the lawyer's question about, Jesus quoted the Shema as the first and greatest commandment. But he didn't stop there. He said that another commandment stood side by side with it.

The commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Instead of getting drawn into the controversial debate over which commandments are more or less important, Jesus declared that the 613 commandments of the Law are not divided into greater or lesser importance, but that they are all united in one common Spirit. Instead of reducing the importance of some laws in comparison to others, Jesus says that they are all one coherent whole. All 613 commandments are united by the two commandments about loving God and loving others. Love for God and love for others should be the lens through which all the Law ought to be interpreted. That means that what is of ultimate importance is not how well we keep the letter of the Law, but by how well we embody the spirit of the Law.

On more than one occasion, Jesus got into trouble for healing someone on the Sabbath. According to casuistic law, healing was an activity that was rightly done on the other six days of the week, but forbidden on the sabbath. Jesus' counterargument was that, if a person needed to be healed, the loving thing to do was to heal them. Not to make them wait and come back later. As a reminder to them that their legalistic approach to the sabbath diverged from the spirit of sabbath, Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." Jesus reminded them that somewhere along the line, keeping the many casuistic laws that were created to help people faithfully keep the Sabbath had taken precedence over the purpose of keeping the Sabbath.

Jesus was not opposed to the Law. He was not an anarchist. He was concerned that the letter of the law could be confused or even manipulated to counteract the spirit of the law. Jesus once said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law. I have not come to abolish the Law but to fulfill it." Jesus suggested that the fulfillment of law and order is not complete until the spirit of the law is part of the equation. And the spirit of the law was summed up in loving God and loving neighbor.

Jesus was talking about agape love. Agape love is not romantic or sentimental. Agape love is not reserved for only those who are like us, who agree with our thinking, who we approve of, or who might love us back. Jesus taught his disciples that agape love extended even to the ways they thought about and treated even those who persecuted them. Simply put, agape love is a reflection of the way we experience God's unconditional love for us in the ways we relate to others. Without agape love, we can convince ourselves that obeying the letter of the law is what God wants from us. Apart from agape love, laws can be subverted to the self-interest and prejudices of those who write and interpret the laws.

In the words of Fred Beuchner, "You can make yourself moral. You can make yourself religious. But you can't make yourself love." The purpose of the Law is guide us in seeing and treating others as God sees and treats us. It is a Living Word that is always being interpreted and giving forth new truth. That doesn't mean that the Bible says whatever we want it to say in order to support what we already believe to be true. But that our understanding of scripture is shaped by our experience of Jesus.

Today, on Reformation Sunday, we recall the importance of the Protestant Reformation. When a large part of Christianity determined that some of the teachings and practices of the Church had strayed from the Spirit that speaks to humanity through scripture. The result was a movement that sought to return to the spirit of God's Word. And God is still speaking!

This week, the Pope reversed centuries of Catholic doctrine by condoning same sex civil unions. Below the surface of this endorsement for laws that the Catholic Church had previously opposed lay a more fundamental shift—a shift in acceptance of the personhood of people who had formerly been ostracized by the church. In Pope Francis’ words, “Homosexual people have the right to be in a family. They are children of God.” Justice always follows the arc of compassion and acceptance. The path, not only of law and order, but of law and order and love.

Law and order have become an election year hot topic. If Jesus’ teaching that the true purpose of the Law is to love God and love our neighbor, then contemporary Christians need to be careful about not placing obedience to a black and white interpretation of the letter of the law above showing love in the ways that Jesus taught and demonstrated.

Law and order do not necessarily equal justice where they are not inspired by agape love. Remember that human slavery was once the law of the land. And when slavery was abolished Jim Crow laws perpetuated racist values. Once upon a time, interracial marriage was a crime. Not that long ago, same-sex marriage was not a thing. And, let’s not forget that Jesus’ arrest, trial and crucifixion followed legal procedures for that time. Law and order are essential for any civilized society. Human beings need to have laws that establish limits on what is and isn’t permissible. We need boundaries to curb our worst impulses in order for there to be justice. But when everyone is not treated equally and fairly under the law, that is not justice.

For those who follow Jesus, God’s Word for our lives cannot be fully expressed in 600 or six million commandments. It is found in the life and example of the Word become flesh – Jesus. And to the extent that we live by the two commandments of love that unite all the rest, let us pray that it may be found in us, as well.

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