

Third Sunday in Lent (Lent 3B) – March 8, 2015
Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25; John 2:13-22
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

A Righteous Rant: A Renewal of Religion

Diving into today's gospel, I was reminded of Edward Lear's old limerick: "There was an Old Man of Hong Kong / Who never did anything wrong. He lay on his back / With his head in a sack / That [*boring*] Old Man of Hong Kong."ⁱ Well Jesus, as we see again in today's gospel, was anything but boring, and he got into plenty of trouble!

Customs, rules, commandments, statutes, law codes. There are lots of them. We read again today the Ten Commandments in the Book of Exodus, as well as the praise of God's Law in our Psalm; and we heard about Jesus' action in clearing or cleansing the Temple precincts—an action which ran counter to several religious codes and customs.

Obviously, there are lots of commandments and laws not just in Scripture, but throughout society. Some of them seem too harsh, others not protective enough. A lot of times laws are confusing, even conflicting—for example laws which serve local concerns but which violate higher laws of the land. Then there are even higher laws, such as international law and international agreements which, according to our own Constitution, are the highest laws of our land, but which often seem to be too undesirable or breakable, unattainable or subtle, ineffective and unenforceable, as evidenced in the ways some of these higher laws have been flouted. As well, there are unjust laws, laws that have had to be broken and then repealed. Whole movements such as the anti-slavery and women's suffrage movements, and later the Civil Rights movement—and other movements for social justice at work today—have had to struggle to get unjust laws replaced by just laws. Here at home and around the world we still have some ways to go.

So, what is law anyway? As Frederick Buechner points out, there are basically two kinds.ⁱⁱ The first kind are laws of the way things ought to be. The second kind are laws of the way things are. He cites the law of "No Trespassing" as an example of the first kind and the Law of Gravity as an example of the second kind. Now many people think God's Law, like the Ten Commandments, or the Sermon on the Mount, has to be spelled out in terms of the first kind of law, a compendium of dos and don'ts, oughts and shall nots. Certainly, most laws of society fit this first category. These laws are the work of legislators, courts, and custom. When obeyed, these laws serve the useful purpose of keeping a degree of order within a free civil society, and of keeping us from each other's throats. Human beings, being prone to evil either as perpetrators or victims, need the support of law. As the theologian Paul Tillich stated: "Since the law cannot be wholly internalized in the conscience of imperfect humanity, conscience must be externalized into law." Therefore we need to elevate people to the level of most laws and not to lower the law to the level of the people. At the very least, if laws cannot make evil people good, they can make the innocent safe. As Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, "morals cannot be legislated but behavior can be regulated."ⁱⁱⁱ

Then what about God's Law, such as the Ten Commandments? If they are only a compendium of dos and don'ts, then they can do no more than keep us from each other's throats. From ancient times to the present, various religious institutions and communities have been highly structured, with clear-cut policies and procedures, routines and rituals, laws and statutes that build cohesion, identity and a certain resilience to face an otherwise hostile world.

It was such a religious "in-group" legal system that Jesus found himself confronting. Whether by violating certain dietary or ritual laws as he associated with foreigners and social outcasts and healed on the Sabbath; or as he overturned the tables in the Temple precincts, Jesus cut through certain laws to expose legalism and inequity and called for a refocusing on the real purpose and heart of God's law, namely, to promote justice and love. It was in order to tell the religious leaders of the Temple that they had turned God's law into a narrow and unjust legalism that Jesus disturbs the Temple precincts. According to this lesson from John, Jesus starts his public ministry with this righteous rant, a cutting through of petty sacrificial laws and customs which oppressed especially foreigners and others who came to the Temple. These ritual laws, for example, stated that no Gentiles could come into the inner courts of the Temple precincts; and they required that people who could come into the temple precincts had to exchange their currency (often at a loss) for the Temple currency; and they also required that no one could bring their own animals to offer sacrifices, but had to purchase the often overpriced animals at the Temple. This scene exemplifies the reality that this is a world with two kinds of changers—the social changers and the money-changers. Jesus brought this into stark relief and cuts the issue, in essence saying to everyone, "So, which kind of changer are you?" He cuts through these petty laws to get to the heart of the matter in an act which put him in the crosshairs of the authorities.

Now, it's easy for us to condemn those ancient Pharisees and their legalistic system and thank God we're not like them. But as Henri Nouwen pointed out, "We are all legalists most of the time. All of us enjoy the feeling of peace and security that can come from obeying a clear, specific code of conduct; and every society and religious community does its best to provide them...[Such codes of conduct] have a certain place in our lives. They also offer us a certain safety and comfort; but, when they become our main coping device, they make us rigid, even dead."^{iv} But rather than abandoning all the wisdom and guidance of the ethical tradition of religious law for a love and justice ethic that is somehow separate from all that; instead, Jesus, by going to the heart of God's law and finding the love and justice ethic within his own Jewish tradition, in fact, extends the law rather than abandoning it. Jesus says it this way in his Sermon on the Mount, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew. 5:17). Of course, in fulfilling the deeper meaning of the law, Jesus ends up breaking some lesser laws as he turns the tables in the Temple.

As Buechner points out, all this doesn't mean that there isn't a positive Law of God good for all people and between nations even though it's no secret that ideas about what is Right and Wrong vary from time to time and place to place. For example, King Solomon with his 700 wives would not be apt to see eye to eye with a Southern Baptist missionary

on the subject of having more than one spouse. Now, does that mean that morality is all relative to the tastes of the time and is not to be taken any more seriously than tastes in food, dress, or anything else? On one level, this may be so. But there is a much deeper level. We can see this in the following ways. Again, Buechner states,

“In order to be healthy, there are certain rules you can break only at your own peril: eat sensibly, get enough sleep and exercise, avoid bottles marked poison, don’t jump out of boats unless you can swim[, and so on. And in order to be satisfied with life,] there are also certain rules you can break only at your peril: [such as] be at peace with [yourself and] your neighbor; get rid of hatred and envy; [speak] the truth; avoid temptations to evil [that] you’re not strong enough to resist; don’t murder [or] steal [and so on]. Both sets of rules, [rules of health and rules for a satisfied life], are as valid for [Moses or Solomon, or a first century Jew or Christian like Paul; or for a Christian as for a Muslim here and now]. Both sets of rules—the hygienic as well as the moral, describe not [so much] the way people feel life ought to be, but the way they have found [that] life is.”^v

The Law of Love—Spiritual law—is thus a law of the way things are, and only then is it the law of the way things ought to be. It is stated succinctly in the Bible in the First Letter of John (3:14): “Whoever does not love, abides in death.” Like it or not, that’s how it is. “Whoever does not love, abides in death” That applies to individuals and institutions, communities and whole nations. Just as Jesus did not abolish the wisdom of his religious ethical tradition with his love and justice ethic but instead fulfilled it by focusing on its true spirit and intention, we too would do well with the opportunities and pitfalls of living in a global village and with our modern technology to balance all that with the wisdom of the ethical traditions shared by our world’s great faith traditions including our own. We should uphold those principles of the God-given dignity of the human person and the preciousness of life and the importance of the common good as we attempt to live out this love and justice ethic in our perilous times. Again, as the Bible puts it, “whoever does not love abides in death.” Or, as Buechner concludes, if we don’t believe that, we can always put it to the test—interpersonally, or internationally—just the way if we don’t believe the law of gravity, we can always step out a tenth-story window.^{vi}

ⁱ In Edward Lear: 155 Poems (Classic Poetry Series – PoemHunter.com – The World’s Poetry Archive, 2012), p. 45. My use of the word “boring” replaced Lear’s original word “innocuous.”

ⁱⁱ Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 50-51

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom: the Montgomery Story (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), Ch. 11.

^{iv} Henri Nouwen, Lifesigns (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1986), pp. 92-93

^v Buechner, Wishful Thinking, Ibid. pp. 63-64

^{vi} Buechner, Ibid. pp. 50-51. See also Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 72-74.