

Jesus Breaks One of the Ten Commandments

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By Bob Sessions

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” Matthew 5:17

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy. No one or any thing in your household should work on the Sabbath. Not your animals, not even your slaves. (Paraphrase)

Lawgiver and outlaw....Today's Collect

I've been studying Zen philosophy and meditative practices lately. As Lori pointed out in a sermon recently, they're noted for their koans, practices that don't compute, ways to get us to quit thinking and acting in our normal ways. Jesus, too, was master of paradoxical koans, often in the form of parables, in his attempt to get us to quit practicing dualistic, either/or, thinking and take up unitive consciousness. Both/and. Non-dual consciousness.

In an odd way, it would be nice if Jesus' Sabbath defilement was a koan, if he was calling us to a more intuitive unity with the world around us. Instead, he seems to be illustrating a perennial ethical and logical paradox: how to reconcile contradictory moral imperatives.

We all face such paradoxes in our lives, and they tend to be our most difficult decisions, even when they're relatively small matters. Which spouses' relatives should we spend time with this Christmas holiday? Is it better to let our child deal with a bully herself or intervene? Should we vote for candidate X or Y when they have different

positions we like and ones we don't? Is it better to give the bulk of our charity donations to a single organization or spread it around among many?

Sometimes we are faced with more serious moral conflicts. To abort a fetus with Downs Syndrome when we believe in the sanctity of life? To marry an unstable person we love most or choose a safer spouse? To break the law in a protest against what we believe is a serious injustice?

The Psalm and Corinthian readings seem to offer a solution, one that Biblical literalists are especially fond of: let Jesus or God decide. The Psalm says: "I relieved your shoulder of the burden; your hands were freed from the basket." And Paul proclaims: "For we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus' sake."

I, too, believe in leaving my ego behind, in having faith that God will (and should) take care of things. Far too often I fail and realize only after the fact that my weak faith has created a further set of problems. But I'm not convinced that's what Jesus is illustrating in this example. Rather, he seems to be trying to help his followers (and non-followers such as the Pharisees) learn how to deal with the moral paradoxes of life.

Granted, he picks a monumental case (Jesus is good at that!): follow a basic tenet of Jewish life, keep the Sabbath, no work; or follow a basic tenet of his new gospel, help people in need. And what he offers is a third way, a deeper principle to resolve this moral dilemma.

This territory is the heart of philosophical and theological ethics. I spent five decades trying to sort out the strengths and weaknesses of various ethical theories

(with help from every moral philosopher I've studied). Should we base our decisions on the greatest good principle (Utilitarianism); or are there fundamental duties of morality (Deontology); or perhaps we are born with innate moral sense of right and wrong (Intuitionism). We can find cases where each of the higher decision procedures seems superior, and ones where they fail to solve important moral dilemmas.

Which does Jesus use on that Sabbath day when he broke the Fourth Commandment? For sure he is not a Utilitarian. I don't recall any stories in which he teaches his Good News where he tells us to do that which will bring the greatest good for the greatest number of people. That's certainly not what he has in mind here.

No, Jesus asserts here, and in many situations that "the greatest of these is love." When faced with perplexing moral conflicts, always choose love. (He's a Deontologist.) This is a wonderful ideal that we all know and as Christians try to follow. But we also know that it often is difficult to ascertain what love requires and even more difficult to achieve.

Jesus seems to think that such complexities are absent in this situation. So much so that he chastises his followers for being so dense. (His anger is also fueled, of course, by the Pharisees hanging on his every word and deed waiting for him to add to their case against him, and they leave the temple believing that Jesus has handed them a plum.)

I'm not convinced that Mark's reference to David feeding his followers or Jesus' consternation with his followers and the Pharisees truly resolve the dilemma. Granted that we have seen countless examples for millennia of institutions made for humans

turn tables and treat humans as if they were made for institutions. I could give you several examples from our own denomination today! But the Ten Commandments are fundamental principles, pillars of the Jewish faith Jesus claims to respect and aims to fulfill. And to disrespect one commandment is to disrespect them all. Couldn't Jesus show respect for these principles and also show love for the needy by making an appointment for healing on Monday?!

Since most of us at New Song probably are willing to mow our lawns or go shopping on the Sabbath, let's take up a more difficult moral dilemma for us today, one that we too often follow in Jesus' footsteps by dismissing the other side in a too-cavalier fashion.

Abortion. One of the most serious moral issue of our times not only because it's difficult (and far from resolved) philosophically, but also because it is a central fault line separating liberals and conservatives. We believe in the sanctity of life, and we also believe in a woman's right to control her own body. What does the tie-breaking principle of love tell us we should choose?

When put in such stark terms you can understand why I, and probably you, have never met or heard of a woman wrestling with an unwanted pregnancy who didn't struggle mightily whether or not she chose to abort her fetus. Most women suffer doubt, guilt and often depression long after having an abortion. Neither love nor any of the other higher-order principles seem to square this circle!

The trimester strategy of Roe v Wade has never been seen as satisfactory by conservatives who have been trying to get it overturned for decades or liberals who

have defended it. But perhaps it is wiser than we think. It is a compromise that recognizes that both camps have right on their side, both are guided by fundamental moral principles. Granted, fetal trimesters are rather strange tools for sorting out such a crucial moral dilemma, but they're based on the court's recognition that there is no clear legal or moral solution.

I must admit that I find myself on the other side of the abortion debate than my liberal tendencies usually lead me when it comes to babies with Downs Syndrome. I spent a summer during my college years working in an institution for developmentally disabled people and the bulk of my time was spent recreating with people with Downs Syndrome. We have good friends who have a teenage Downs child, and she, like many I worked with 55 years ago, is a delightful person who brings joy to those who know her. So I'm very troubled by the movement in Iceland and some other European countries to eradicate, through selective abortions, all Downs babies.

As a liberal I often decry the seeming hard-heartedness of conservatives who ask people I believe are victims of an unfair system, or whose lack of fortune is an accident of birth, to take responsibility for their lives and not depend on government largess. But I have lived long enough to realize that many people could solve at least some of their own problems or take more responsibility and that too easy access to public resources can harm their initiative and personal integrity. Crafting social policies that take into account this tension between victimhood and initiative is not easy, and I wish Jesus' principle of love would clearly resolve such common and large-scale issues.

My ruminations about Jesus' admonition to love in the context of complex moral dilemmas has led me to believe there's a deeper lesson in our scripture readings for

today. Love is a different kind of moral principle than the others. In fact, in our usual sense it may not be a moral principle at all. Love asks us to listen, to be personally involved, to be willing to give of ourselves, to get down and dirty; not to find an abstraction that splits philosophical hairs. For we humans, individually and collectively, are infinitely complex, and while we need guiding principles and laws, we should never pretend that we have easy answers...or perhaps sometimes any answers at all. What we have are countless opportunities to join with our fellow humans, those asking for and needing our help, but also those with whom we disagree, in a search for at least temporary solutions that are filled with love.

None of this means that I support the extraordinarily restrictive abortion law just signed by Governor Reynolds. If anything, the new law is a textbook case illustrating how to avoid the messy process of listening to all sides and trying to craft a policy that takes seriously what a terribly difficult decision abortion can be. It avoids Jesus' love in the name of loving the unborn.

Put another way, in our highly charged moral and political universe today it is a nearly universal temptation to take the high moral ground based on some abstract principle to make ourselves feel good and simultaneously degrade those with whom we disagree. That's much easier, and seemingly more satisfying, than trying to work out our complex issues in detail and with humility. Amen

