

## **Love and the Law**

*Sermon by Bob Sessions*

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As many of you know, Lori and I just returned from a marvelous trip with our sons and her sister to Norway. A friend there told us that “there are no poor people in Norway.” He said if you try to be poor, say by living under a bridge, the government will hunt you down so they can deliver your monthly share of North Sea oil income!

Another Norway story. On a walk with a friend, she pointed out the house of the richest woman in the city; and we couldn’t tell any differences between it and the middle class houses that filled the neighborhood. It’s very difficult to be rich in Norway because of a steeply graduated tax rate

What’s not to love about Norway! The natural world is gorgeous...and so are the people. Their population is small so the country is uncrowded. Their infrastructures are in great shape. We only saw one policeman in two weeks and he was helping a trucker. Their crime rate is very low and we saw no one begging. We saw countless people of all ages running, often in the rain and always up or down hills. The people were friendly and almost all spoke English. In the countryside, which we loved and saw a lot of, we didn’t see one broken down house or building. Very striking when you consider that unlike Iowa, their soil is terrible and their farm economy small; and yet we’re the ones with abandoned and decaying farmsteads. To borrow from the title of a terrific book on contemporary Scandinavia, the Norwegians are “a nearly perfect people.”

Their small wealth gap (especially in comparison to our own) has a lot to do with the lack of visible policing or poor people, and their commitment to providing for the basic needs of everyone means that people have time for living well as well as scratching a living—they have a much shorter work week than ours, more vacation time, and generous maternity/paternity leaves.

Okay. Before this begins to sound like an advert for Norwegian tourism, let's be more complete. Much of their success has to do with two things: their small and homogeneous population and with North Sea oil. It also has to do with a third factor which, believe it or not, has to do with our lectionary readings for today. I'll get to that shortly.

But you know, America now sells oil and gas around the world. We have had our own oil boom. We are the wealthiest society in the world and yet we have a large and growing gap between the wealthy and the poor. Our drug abuse rates are climbing, our infrastructures are in poor shape, health care is more expensive and less accessible...you know the litany.

I had all of these impressions of Norway running through my mind as I read the Lectionary readings for today. All of the texts, in one way or another, are about the differences between the spirit and letter of the law. This is a very important topic throughout the Bible. Clearly Mark's gospel is right on when it says "it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come." And no doubt it's very easy to be a legalist, one who insists that the crucial thing is to follow the letter of the law. This literalist mistake is rampant in our time as well as Jesus'. You can find it in schools and parenting, in the interpretations of legal strict constructionists, in judgments of moralists

who are only interested in seeing that the rules are followed, and in our own satisfaction that we are being morally upright when we live lives merely within the law.

But there's something deeper that we can learn from our readings. Perhaps the easiest way to see what I want to unearth is to note what the gospel story doesn't say and what the Hebrews historically, if not Jesus' accusers, had right. The Hebrews were not wrong to emphasize that the laws were at the center of their religion and that their identity as a people depended on their upholding the laws in their everyday lives. Jesus was not wrong to call the Pharisees to task for their childish insistence that the disciples had committed a great sin by not washing their hands before they ate. But Jesus' critics surely were correct if they were noting that hand-washing is a good practice and sometimes grownups need to be reminded, right? But more importantly they were reflecting a crucial understanding that people's identities are intricately bound up with their fundamental values, beliefs and traditions, including their laws.

The gospel today says that if I am to be moral I need to act from within and not merely follow the rules. But what is my "inside" made of? It's made of material we have in common--beliefs, values, images, sensibilities, and so on that, to a great extent, I have gotten from my culture, my parents, my friends, my teachers.... And that includes an array of moral precepts, laws like the Ten Commandments...or the Boy Scout Law.

Our sons, Owen and Carl, are Eagle Scouts, and if you would ask me what their basic moral framework is I would say it is the Scout Law—a scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, and so on. They came to their mature understandings and practices of this law through years of modeling, cajoling, repetition, encouragement, talk, hard decisions, mistakes. Through the hard, repetitive work of parenting, but also the

collective work of the scouting community in a wide variety of situations.

Moral development theorists tell us that as we mature we become more capable of seeing difficulties in applying our inherited moral principles in simple ways, whether because of historical changes, competing values, rules that don't cover specific situations clearly, or the need for new rules. They also tell us that a mark of a mature person is the ability to reside in ambiguity, conflict and uncertainty. In other words, to do more than merely follow the letter of the law.

In America we tend to buy into an either/or: either the person is responsible for himself or herself, or people are like children and need the state to take care of them. Our mainstream doctrine tends toward individualism, one side of this dichotomy, wherein we view those who need help as morally deficient and in need of pulling themselves up their own bootstraps.

Enter the Norwegians. From what I can discern, they tend to view people through the alternative lens I've outlined. The individual is unique, separate and distinct, of course; but they also seem to believe that we are our relationships through and through, from our social behaviors to our inner desires, beliefs, values and core identity.

What this means is that while we are responsible for our actions, there is a deep understanding that our actions are socially conditioned in virtually every way. A Norwegian awareness would forefront systemic factors in what a person is and does rather than tend to ignore them as we do. Perhaps this both/and perspective is seen most clearly in their treatment of criminals. If someone commits a crime they are punished. But the Norwegians also try to fix the situation that spawned the criminal behavior and

they try to rehabilitate the person both in and out of prison. Given their low recidivism rate despite short sentences (or perhaps in part because of them!), there is good indication that this both/and perspective works.

Also, if you want to minimize policing rather than maximize it as we tend to do, you create conditions wherein people aren't desperate for what others have and thus aren't tempted to commit crimes. People are shaped by and follow laws both because they are conditioned to and because conditions make such obedience sensible.

We are Trinitarians--we believe the Divine is to be defined in terms of relationships. God is not one, but not three either. God is love, and love is a verb, it only manifests in relationships. The Jews were right: the laws, the basic values hold society together and are constitutive of people's identities; and Jesus is right, at the heart of those laws is a spirit of love. The laws are only valuable in their enactments, as James says. If someone is in need, you help them. If you promise something, you keep your promise. You're loyal to your friends. You wash your hands because you care about your health and that of others. I like to think that Jesus would embrace the Scout Law. Amen