

“Living the Law of Love”

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Deut. 4:1-2, 69, Psalm 15, James 1:17-27, Mark 7:1-8,14-15, 21-23

Well, we’ve finally finished the Bread of Life Discourse where Jesus began to lay out a huge cultural shift for any who would continue to follow him! In discussing it, both Kirk and Bob touched on how the Israelites established their identity as a people, and then a nation, over many generations. How they developed their own religious and cultural beliefs, traditions, and institutions -- many of which are still alive among Jewish people today.

The Book of Deuteronomy, which we read from this morning, retells the Mosaic Law by reviewing the Israelites’ history. Just as they were about to enter the Promised Land, Moses exhorted the Israelites to continue to obey the laws they’d been given by Yaweh. He says keeping their laws is what will allow them to maintain their identity once they settle in this new land occupied by others. One might could say -- “You are the laws you keep.”

Fast forward many centuries, and we find the Pharisees grappling with that same concern for cultural identity. The Jews of Jesus’ day were an oppressed people living in an occupied land, struggling to maintain their way of life. They still did this, in good part, by adhering to the Mosaic Law – which the Pharisees were sticklers about.

Although the Pharisee’s were the Jews Jesus most often criticized, they were also the Jewish sect, among the many that existed, he saw as his closest spiritual kin. So why is Jesus so hard on them here? Most immediately, I think Jesus wanted to jar them out of their paralyzing performance anxiety so they could fall into the arms of his loving Abba God. He wanted them to experience the liberating Love that could bring them more fully alive. He wanted them to know the one true God who is pure Love, and mercy, and forgiveness.

I think Jesus was also telling the Pharisees – and us – that all the laws we make – whether religious then or secular now – all laws are valid only when they express Yaweh’s greatest commandment. Human laws are valid only in as much as they help us to love God with our whole selves and to love others as ourselves. Jesus is reminding the Pharisees not to put the cart before the horse.

He knew they, like all of us, can only realize the fullness of our basic human identity, when we experience ourselves as fully loved. Loveable and loved when we do right – and even when we don’t. It’s only because we’re eternally loved into life by God that we’re able to love anybody, ourselves included.

As finite, flawed beings, we humans need to set and heed boundaries for the sake of everyone's well-being, and especially to protect the most vulnerable. But more often than we'd like to admit, we use our laws not to manifest love, compassion, and justice, but to protect privilege and exclude outsiders, to control those who are different and inflict vengeance on those who hurt us. Laws too often become one more weapon in our perennial "us against them" wars – something that's all too evident in our political life today.

The apostle Paul went so far as to say the law brings death, while only Christ's Spirit can bring life. I would say, that in the same way Jesus is the Bread of Life, he is also the embodiment of God's Law of Love. A law much like the law of gravity, that operates beyond our control. The Spirit Christ bestows on us is the Spirit of divine Love, which we're meant to share without exclusion or conditions. The Christ Spirit empowers us to live by the Law of Love.

Living by the Law of Love is quite a bit different from merely conforming to rules and regulations. Obedience to the Law of Love requires deep listening and a willing responsiveness to the still, small voice of God within and all around us. It requires humility and self-sacrifice freely given. And, as Bob Dylan said, to live outside the law you must be honest – sometimes excruciatingly honest.

In our day, we tend to forget that the earliest laws were all religious laws, and were first formulated to carefully ritualize, and thus make safe, blood sacrifice. Blood sacrifice, first as human and then animal sacrifice, was a universal practice among archaic human communities because, paradoxically, it helped keep the peace.

The Jews of Jesus' day of course still practiced animal sacrifice. But Jesus followed the Hebrew prophetic tradition that declared God's abhorrence for it. He even said, in quite graphic terms, that a gift of bread and wine, a sign of his own **self**-sacrifice, would please God more. Jesus scolding the Pharisees for their holiness code nit-picking, then, was really a challenge to the ancient tradition of blood sacrifice and the rigid cultural walls erected around it.

So, we might ask ourselves – what attitudes or habits have we inherited that we're called to let go of? What legacies do we fall back on that interfere with fully receiving our identity from God? I still work to root out the vestiges of racism in me, as I know many of you do as well. We didn't create it, but it's ours to deal with now. On a more mundane level, a family legacy I wrestle with is my attachment to being "right" -- which I most often express by getting in the last word in arguments. John can tell you this definitely makes me less loveable to mere mortals, even if not to God.

Jesus' message to the Pharisees is much like what James later said to a fledgling Christian community, also grappling with their identity. They, too, squabbled about who was holier and so more worthy of God's love.

Jesus and James both remind us that whatever religious mores or cultural traditions we live by, God really calls us to adhere to just one law – the Law of Love. And as Presiding Bishop Curry recounts so well in his book "Love Is the Way," love is an action word. More than just a feeling, which is certainly part of the experience of love, love means taking concrete actions for the well-being of others. Both things we do and things we stop ourselves from doing.

Looking at the darker side of things, Jesus tells us we don't become corrupt by doing or not doing this or that religious practice, but only by selfish things we do to others. James lays out more positive parameters – be quick to listen and slow to speak, slow to anger; take care of those in any need. He likens the Law of Love to a mirror and tells us how important it is to act on what we see in the Divine Mirror that reflects God's love for us.

I try to look in this mirror at the end of every day. One of my bedtime rituals is to briefly look back on my day to notice God's presence in ways large and small, and then just savor that with gratitude. Then I look for times during the day I reflected that love out to the world, savoring that as well. Finally, I look for the ways I may have turned my back on God's love. And I give thanks for that noticing, too. It's not so much a mea culpa time, as it is a way to recognize and honor God's love. To enjoy what's there to enjoy, to accept everything, and to let it all go so I can be more fully present to God's love in the next moment. I wonder what ways you might have for taking note of God's loving presence in your life?

To know ourselves as freely and fully loved by God and to share that love in how we live – that's absolutely all God wants for us and from us. That's it! Nothing more – and nothing less.

In closing, I'd like to share a favorite prayer by the 20th century Spanish Jesuit Pedro Arrupe that reminds to me stay rooted in God's Law of Love.

Nothing is more practical
 than finding God,
 than falling in Love
 in a quite absolute, final way.

What you are in love with,
 what seizes your imagination,

will affect everything.

It will decide

what will get you out of bed in the morning,
what you do with your evenings,
how you spend your weekends,
what you read, whom you know,
what breaks your heart,
and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.

Fall in Love, stay in Love,
and it will decide everything.

Amen!