

Law and Love

Law and love.

It's a tricky business.

It's what's at the core of today's rather odd gospel lesson, which begins with a snarky lawyer (is there any other kind?) trying to trip up Jesus yet again, and ends with some inside baseball on the Jewish faith.

Last week they came after him about taxes — do we have to pay them?

Then came the trick question about the woman who married seven brothers — whose wife is she after the resurrection?

And now today, the lawyer is asking Jesus to rank the most important of the 613 laws of God — knowing full well that Jewish tradition says there is no ranking — if God makes laws, then all laws are equal.

What Jesus does with this challenge is a beautiful thing to behold.

In a way, he picks up a pair of glasses, puts them on, and says something like this:

“All law is intended to be seen, understood, followed, interpreted and obeyed through the eye glasses of love - love of God being the right lens and love for all people being the left lens.”

This basic truth seems to be lost on a good many proclaimed Christians these days, as some refuse to bake wedding cakes for gay folks, along with an almost militant form of evangelical Christianity that pretends to give God's blessing to war and nuclear weapons; that is fueling a most despicable form of white nationalism, white supremacy.

And yet, when we wrestle with the law that says people of the same gender having sexual relations is an abomination — things change when we look at that law through the eyeglasses of love.

What comes into focus is that when that Biblical law was written down, it was NOT speaking about people of the same gender living in committed, self-sacrificing, loving relationships.

Instead, it was speaking of wealthy men preying on young boys, or having sex for the sake of the sex, demeaning and dehumanizing the participants; and of course when that type of behavior is viewed through the lens of love — it is an abomination! — because any sexual relationship engaged in without love and commitment and sacrifice falls short of who we are called to become.

Just so, a committed, giving, and loving relationship between two people, irrespective of gender, seen through the lens of love, is something to be blessed, something to be welcomed.

The same applies when scripture is misused to justify war or to promote one race of people over another.

Like any library, you can find a line in scripture to justify just about anything.

But when scripture is read through the lens of love, then there is no place for hate, no place to proclaim that I am somehow better than you.

And this is the point it seems that Jesus wishes to make with our lawyer today.

Every rule, every expectation, every prohibition, every command is given life and breathes and inspires and guides us all from the rootstock of love.

Without love there is only lifeless, arbitrary, and power-driven law; which is why, as we discovered weeks ago, Jesus gives us the power to bind and loose all rules and traditions and laws (Mt 16:19-20) – precisely because life changes, human relations change – so that a living law, lived through the lens of love, lived through the Spirit of the living God – can and must change as well.

Only through the lens of love can we see clearly what needs to be bound and what needs to be loosed.

God is not finished with us yet!

There are some among us who were born in an age when women could not vote, much less aspire to answer God's call to ordained life; we are only a few generations removed from a time when African-Americans were deemed to be three-fifths of a human being, and in my lifetime, it was illegal for persons of different races to marry one another in many of these United States.

Law and love: it tests us every day, especially perhaps when we get right down to debating what it is that God wishes for us.

Listen to just a smattering of the comments that fly about in our very public debates about sexuality and war:

There is this:

“That's why I left the Church and don't care about organized religion – who are we to judge who other people love???”

Followed by this:

“That's NOT being judgmental, it's letting God's word be the judge!”

"You mean that collection of notes written by men and collected over centuries and then voted upon by another group of men that somehow then became the actual Word of God?"

And this:

"Deuteronomy says you should stone disobedient children - should we warn child protective services about you?"

Or how about this?

"In the case of North Korea, God has given Trump authority to take out Kim Jong Un."

And so it goes....

I think that snarky lawyer was trying to draw Jesus into just such an exchange; but of course, wearing the eye glasses of love, Jesus sidesteps the pitched and fraught attacks and gently leads us to catch a glimpse of the world as God always intended it to be.

And that's what brings us to the last part of the gospel — that odd and obscure discussion about who the Messiah is in relation to King David.

Maybe your eyes glazed over at that part, maybe they are glazing over right now!

Who cares about this inside baseball of Jewish religious thinking?

Well, we probably ought to care.

Because what Jesus seems to be getting at is this:

The Jewish people expected the Messiah to be David's son, and as the son, to follow in the father's footsteps: to be Israel's Rambo and to root

out the outsiders, to establish forever the lines between good and bad, clean and unclean, us and them.

But Jesus tells them that the Messiah is not a chip off the old block: the Messiah is something altogether new; bringing into existence a world that is not made up of insiders and outsiders, but a world that welcomes every last one of us.

And perhaps Jesus is saying something like that to us as well.

That Jesus, he whom through all things are made, has a reach far beyond the laws of the church as he gathers together so many who are beyond the reach of the church — that the lens of love is determined to have us all: Christian and Jew, Hindu and Buddhist; straight and gay; every creed and no creed, all are the beloved children of this God who makes all things, who makes all people, new.

I shall leave you with this.

It is the imagining of a self-hating, rock bottom, lost it all alcoholic who, in a drunken speech spoken to no one, says this about the final judgment of God:

“And he will judge and forgive them all, the good and the evil, the wise and the meek.

And when he is done with all of them, then he will summon us.

‘You too come forth ye drunkards, come forth ye weak ones, come forth ye children of shame.’

And we shall all come forth without shame and shall stand before him.

And he will say to us:

‘You are swine made in the image of the beast and with his mark.

But come ye also.'

And the wise ones and those with understanding will say:

'O Lord, why dost thou receive these men?'

And he will say:

'This is why I receive them, O ye of understanding.

Not one of them believed himself to be worthy of this!'

And he shall hold out his hands to us and we shall fall down before him.....

...and we shall weep....

...and we shall understand all things and all will be understood.""
Dostoyevsky, Crime and Punishment.

Law and love.

In the end, there is only love.

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