

Sermon, 10-4-15

How are you in relation to the law? In other words, how do you feel about, how do you respond to, how do you comply with the law derived from Scripture and the state? I guess we might reply, "It depends." That response makes me think of two funny stories.

One was told by the great filmmaker, Alfred Hitchcock. I remember seeing him on a talk show once when I was a boy. He said that his audience most often identified with the criminal. For proof, he gave the example of the character played by Cary Grant in his classic movie, "To Catch a Thief." In one scene, we see the jewel thief completing his heist as the police are charging up the stairs to arrest him. As the scene unfolds, with whom do we identify? That's right, we all are saying, "Hurry up, get out of there, they're coming!"

In another story, it is said that someone once walked in on the great comedian W.C. Fields reading the Bible. Fields was not known as a religious man, so the person was surprised and asked, "Bill, what are you doing?" Fields is said to have responded, "Looking for loopholes."

Those stories capture the ambivalence that many of us feel about the law. Our response is often based on the situation in which the law comes up and how it applies to us and our lives. As one person said, "We want the law enforced aggressively —until it is applied to us." Just think of traffic tickets, IRS audits, even home owner association notices. You get the point.

The law is something that comes up often in the stories of Jesus and especially in his encounters with the religious leaders who opposed his teaching and ministry. What we find in these encounters is the opposition bringing up a legal issue as a way to trap Jesus in what he practiced and taught. And Jesus consistently outwits them, providing an interpretation that does not undermine the purpose of the law, but rather offers deeper understanding.

We get an example of this in the story we heard this morning about marriage and divorce. We may be surprised to learn that there is only one small passage of the entire Hebrew Bible that addresses divorce and it seems to be fairly straightforward. The main prohibition is that divorced persons cannot remarry each other if there has been an intervening marriage. Clear enough.

But it does make me wonder why his opponents were asking Jesus that particular legal question. What about his teaching and ministry made his opponents think Jesus might get caught off guard by this query? Perhaps it was the way he was known to treat women and those the law considered sinners.

Regardless, Jesus' first response, as he so often did as a good rabbi, was to refer them to the law. Once they got that rule clear, Jesus then gave a surprise citation beyond the particular rule—God's intention from the beginning. God's original plan was for a man and a woman to form a loving relationship that would reflect and extend God's love to each other and the world around them. That is the deeper law, not the social regulations required because of our hard hearts.

That answer shocked these religious leaders. It apparently even shocked Jesus' disciples because they asked him to explain his views again when they were alone. Jesus' deeper view was unsettling because he undermined how the assumptions of this law served the existing

power structure—that men had total control regarding divorce in that day and culture. Jesus' words challenged and redirected that law in order to fulfill God's original purpose.

Now as an aside, ironically, Jesus' words have been used by the church to erect a superstructure of rules that make it difficult if not impossible for people to get out of a bad marriage; or to be forgiven for getting divorced for the wrong reason. I don't believe that bundle of regulations was Jesus' intention.

Law that sucks life out of us is not from God; and as the church, as people of faith, we need to stand up and remind people of God's original intention—forming loving relationships in marriages and families and communities of faith that reflect and extend God's love to each other and the world around us.

So when laws from the Bible or from our civil government are not true to that original divine plan, we need to at the very least question them; and then depending on the discernment of our community, challenge them both by how we live and by how we vote and work for change to church and state.

We saw this most clearly with the abolition of slavery in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the civil rights movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Looking back, no one but the very extreme today would say that the changes that came from those movements were wrong. Yet back then, people made impassioned arguments saying we needed to keep things the same because the law was shaped by our religious beliefs. Sad but true, it was often faith leaders who made that argument and resisted the change that was true to God's original intention.

But those movements were over 50 or 150 years ago. So we need to ask ourselves today, "What are those type of issues of law for us in this century? What do we need to do as people of faith to live differently ourselves and call people to change unjust laws?" Or as our new, hot off the press, diocesan purpose statement proclaims, "We challenge ourselves and the world to love like Jesus as we worship joyfully, serve compassionately, and grow spiritually."

I am not going to give you a list of those issues from the pulpit this morning. But I will offer a couple of clues that help me as I look at issues of law. The first one comes from the Gospel for today when Jesus stated, "It was because you were so hard hearted that he wrote that commandment for you" (10:5). So the first clue is, "What evokes feelings of hard heartedness in me?"

Go home this week and pay attention to your heart. When do you get angry—or hear others get angry-- in such a way that we hear pronouncements like, "Round them all up and send them back" or "Kill them all and let God sort it out." Hopefully those are extreme examples that none of us would ever say. But you get my point. Look for those types of feelings as signs we need to check out.

And then as people of faith, we can use prayer, study, conversation, and reflection as means of grace to ask God to change our hearts. That change allows us to seek relationships with "those people" that we might feel tempted to use the law to condemn in some way—for example, immigrants and prisoners today.

How we treat them-- or how politicians propose to treat them-- is not unlike how our society treated slaves, black folks, divorced people—and until very recently, gay and lesbian

people-- in the past. Remember God's original intention for us-- forming loving relationships and communities that reflect and extends God's love to each other and the world around us.

The second clue is when we feel fear. When I am afraid, one of my first reaction is to seek control. That is when focusing on religious or civil law can be our default response. We believe if we properly enforce the law, then God would be pleased; or those bad people would be brought under control; or society would just work better, like it did in some imagined past. But that is not true.

Don't get me wrong—I like the law. I try hard to follow the rules of society and the legal foundations of my faith. Lynn and I taught the law to our children by word and example. We are pretty boringly law abiding—except for speeding sometimes. The law has a purpose that is good-- but it is not enough.

The law provides needed order in society. And if used properly, the law can lead to repentance and a change of heart that can produce the loving relationships and communities that God intends for us. But we cannot legislate and enforce our way to the kingdom of God. The path our Lord blazed for us is one of humility and faithfulness and a loving justice that fights for the right and forgives the wrong. That is our Lord's way and law without love will never clean us up and give us new life. It is just not possible.

It reminds me of the tender words the daughter of a friend of ours said in the eulogy at the funeral for her mother. To fully get it, you would have had to know Holly. But I think you will get the point. She said of her mom, "She taught me how to follow the rules, because they are important; and she taught me how to break the rules, because they are not that important."

What rules do we need to break today in order to move beyond what prevents us from following the path that Jesus set for us? In the weeks and months ahead, we will pray and talk together and build bridges with people beyond our circle in order to find and follow that way. Amen.