

Exodus 20: 1-17
I Corinthians 1: 18-25
John 2: 13-22

Rules and Breaking Rules
March 4, 2018
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The teenage years are a great time for challenging rules. Whether it's our parents' rules about curfews and cars, or the school's rules about a dress code, or some unwritten social rules about how to navigate romance, when we get to be 14, 15, 16 (or sometimes younger) many of us want to throw them all over and decide for ourselves. It's part of normal human development. One of my big issues in high school is what I was allowed to wear, whether it was my favorite jeans (forbidden in 9th and 10th grade) or an armband protesting the war in Viet Nam or supporting Black Liberation. My back was up. I was outraged that anyone thought they could tell me what to wear. And, look at me now, in my preaching clothes: pretty normal.

At the same time, I knew that some rules were necessary. I just needed to figure out which ones those were. Today, I turn to one of the Church Fathers, Augustine, to help me. He wrote about "rightly ordered loves." This springs out of St Paul's teaching: "The one who loves the 'other' has fulfilled the law."

Whatever you want to believe about the Exodus story and the leadership of Moses, it is in this narrative that we find an enormous leap of insight about relationships and love. Of course, we get burning bushes and plagues, and parting seas and food in the desert and fiery pillars: God expressed in miraculous events. But the crowning theophany, the ultimate display of who God is, happens through the giving of 10 words or 10 rules or 10 obligations. It turns out that it matters, in approaching God, how we approach other human beings. A huge insight. And when God introduces these "commandments" God reminds the people of their own experience of pain and dysfunction: in the Deuteronomy version of this passage it is called "the house of slavery" in Egypt. They are done with that house. That's in the past. But because they know that pain, they can live differently. In devotion to the God of liberation, they leave behind lesser gods, lesser idols, lesser objects of worship. The former slaves – those who had been beaten down by their work - lift up a day of rest as a holy thing: a holy thing for everyone, not just for some... a human right, if you will.

Then the people who had lived in the house of slavery, where relationships are controlled by the slave-owners, hear that relationships are lifted up as having holy value. Relationships between parent and child, between husband and wife, and between neighbors – these are the settings where devotion to God may be expressed. When covenant - a relationship-forming agreement – is made between divinity and humanity, we open up all our human interactions to blessing. Our living and our worship become congruent. This was the flash of insight on Sinai.

Rules and Commandments and Laws: the theologian Paul Tillich described law in three categories: autonomy, based on one's *own* desires and values, heteronomy, the *enforcement* of behavior, often contrary to one own wishes, and theonomy, those rules that emerge from the human-divine relationship, which promote both individual and communal well-being and flourishing, even when we may not be aware of it. The people who heard Moses on Sinai saw the Ten Commandments as a form of the last of those: a theonomy of love which embraced their day to

day relationships. Afterwards, a system of more rules, customs, and dialogue about the meaning of rules, continued to develop, and it continues to this day.

How easy it is for us to rationalize and distance ourselves from the loving structure, the loving reminders, in the 10 duties God gave for our own flourishing! Keeping the Sabbath is a quaint artifact that we violate without remorse. Theft and greed are celebrated in advertising. And we identify increased spending with fiscal health, not to mention our willingness to destroy the environment for short-term gain. Even though we speak about healthy, faithful relationships, we are sold commodities and entertainment based on pure sex appeal. What is the #me too movement but a reminder of the damage done by lying, infidelity and the objectification of other human beings? Engraving the 10 Commandments on stone tablets outside a courthouse will not stop us from breaking the rules, apparently. We have, in some ways, returned to the “house of slavery,” where relationships don’t matter.

There are rules, there are customs, there is dialogue about these things...and then there’s “zeal.” Consuming zeal. John’s Gospel gives us an eye-opening scene near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. It says that “the Passover of the Jews was near,” that time when people were reminded of slavery and freedom, of God’s power and love, of the lasting covenantal relationship. Jesus, along with many other pilgrims, makes his way to the Temple in Jerusalem, recently rebuilt by King Herod and his sons. In the courtyard, he finds what has always been there, nothing new, just people who help facilitate the sacrificial rituals that have been going on for centuries. Business as usual. I’ve noticed that Jesus often took “business as usual” as an occasion for a teaching moment. He engages in what is either a piece of spiritual street theater (think Bread & Puppet) or a display of uncontrollable righteous anger. His disciples remember the event with a Scriptural reference from the Psalms: “Zeal for your house will consume me.” Jesus demands the end of buying and selling, and seems to announce the end of this way of relating to God. In doing so, he is definitely breaking the rules.

Now, “zeal” is an interesting word here. The original word has also been translated as envy, indignation, fervent mind, and jealousy. It’s more than just enthusiasm (though *that* word really means ‘God-possessed,’ which might describe Jesus as well). Jesus is angry, and he does not keep it to himself. The system is messed up, and he is going to make some noise about it. Naturally, this is not normally the first story we tell about Jesus to our toddlers or to our friends who are curious about the church. We like the loving Jesus, not the Zealot Jesus. But here is a serious example of when anger and love have a symbiotic relationship. Can anger be good, or righteous, or redemptive? Certainly when God is angry with the chosen people in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is because the love God has for the people, the desire for their flourishing, is so deep. Paul’s letter to the Romans has 50 references to the wrath of God...not because God is a big meanie, but because the love is so deep. The things that we love stir up our emotions when they are threatened. What makes us angriest is always linked to the things we love most.

I remember the time when I lost my son Willy at the Children’s Museum in Boston. He was 6, and he’s my middle child, so I had a three-year-old and an eight-year old in tow at the same time. Eventually, with the help of the staff, we found him (he had wandered back and forth to the exterior parking lot 3 times) and all was well. But during the search, although I was outwardly calm, I kept thinking, “If anyone has taken or messed with my son, I will personally do them great damage.” I was on fire. I was zealous. I was ready for violence on behalf of Willy. Anger and love have a symbiotic relationship.

So how do we distinguish between destructive anger, aka the sin of wrath and what is good and righteous anger? I suggest that we come back to the “rightly ordered loves” of Augustine. We do not start with love of self, or love of power or love of things. We can certainly get angry based on those loves, but it will not be righteous or productive. We start with love of God, the God who demanded care for “the least of these,” who commanded that we respect those who are different from us, who weeps when we create barriers to abundant life. We move on to love of Jesus, whose powerful and loving presence compelled his followers even after his death. And then we realize that all relationships can be held by those love anchors. With Jesus, we become angry with systems and structures that oppress. We become angry with those who would profit from the sweat and pain of others. We become angry with those who profit from the death of children. We become angry out of our love for the weakest among us.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. that great rule-breaker, said, "I became convinced that noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good."

This past year, the United Church of Christ, to which this church belongs, uses the idea of The Three Great Loves to clarify and unify the mission of its congregations. The Three Loves are Love of Children, Love of Neighbor, and Love of Creation. We are encouraged to ask ourselves:
How does your church embody its love for children?
How does your church incarnate the love of Jesus in seeking to love your neighbor?
How does your church uphold the mandate to steward the Earth by demonstrating a love for creation?

The truth is, sometimes these loves are felt so strongly that we must break the rules to express that love. Zeal consumes us. Jesus came to challenge rather than reinforce our illusions and prejudices. He came to make religion less cozy and safe. He asks us to follow, through anger to the other side: a world redeemed by love.
Amen.