

"Love v. Law"

Genesis 12:1-7; John 3:1-17

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Ohio
April 2, 2017 – 5th Sunday in Lent – Rev. Ronald Botts

An English barrister once offered a downside to becoming a lawyer: "A [person] who has had legal training is never quite the same again, never able to look at things free from legal habits or beliefs. It is not easy for a lawyer to become a political scientist. It is very difficult to think as a sociologist or historian [for] he [or she] is interested in rights and rules." Now Hector or Amanda might think this a bit overstated, but there is some truth here. However we're raised or trained, it inevitably influences how we look at life.

For example, teachers seem to view problems for how they can be turned into learning opportunities. Physicians consider that most affliction can be resolved through knowledge and proper treatment. Architects tend to see the interrelationship between design and function. Managers have learned that teamwork can frequently make the difference between failure and success. This is all a way of saying that our backgrounds and experience do affect our approach to living.

It also helps us to better understand the mind of the Pharisees, whom we encounter in today's Gospel. They were men who were steeped in the legalities of religious Law and who were often the antagonists in encounters with Jesus. The scriptures record numerous occasions where the Pharisees had difficulty with both the teachings and the lifestyle of our Master.

These "legalists" believed that God desired the Jews to abide strictly by the Law, and so they were quite concerned with adhering to a traditional framework of rules and regulations that had been handed down. They believed that to follow religious law to the letter was the proper way to serve the Lord; to ignore it was to be unfaithful.

Perhaps this sheds some light on why members of this sect were upset when Jesus' disciples failed to perform the cleansing ritual before eating. They were aghast how he, a rabbi, could overlook such obvious laxity in his closest followers. The Pharisees, committed as they were to strict interpretation, weren't about to let this sacrilege go unchallenged.

In one encounter with Jesus they say: "Tell us why it is that your disciples don't follow the teaching handed down by our ancestors, but instead eat with ritually unclean hands?"

The question is not posed to gain new insight from Jesus; rather, it's intended to force him to offer a defense for improper conduct. The Pharisees had already passed judgment on this error | and now confronted Jesus about the issue. It was an open and shut case to them. Jesus responds to their accusation and, in so doing, puts Law and love in perspective for them | and for us.

In his response, Jesus did not disregard the religious Law's many regulations and applications. Clearly, religion without tenets is arbitrary. Life without structure is chaos. But

rules, he cautioned, are not to be so totally and rigidly set that compassion and common sense is lost.

Ritual has its place. Deference has its place. These weren't points of difference for Jesus. What he didn't share with the Pharisees was their rigid, unbending attitude toward religious practice. He said they needed to be reborn and to have a whole new outlook.

The problem with the Pharisees was that they were often so caught up with the letter of the law that they really failed to catch the intent of the law. They were so concerned with the "don'ts" of their practice that they were prone to overlook the "do's." They were so quick to condemn transgressors that they lost track of the intention behind the practices.

Today we'd probably agree that adherence to ritual framework is, by itself, no guarantee that God's will is being carried out. It would be nice if life worked that way and then we'd always be assured of doing the right thing and being in the Lord's favor.

Jesus looked at faithfulness more basically. There are sins of commission—doing what you shouldn't. But there are also sins of omission—failing to do what you should. He regarded both with concern.

The Pharisees were experts in knowing what to avoid, but too often it stopped right there. Other action might have been called for but, more often than not, they were satisfied that they had already fulfilled their obligations. It's no wonder then that Jesus' emphasis on positive response contrasts so sharply with the negative prohibitions that were of such concern to the legalists.

Let me put it this way. Consider the difference between saying "Love your neighbor" and "Don't treat your neighbor badly." To love means to be sensitive to others' needs and then doing what is required by the circumstances. So then avoiding intentional hurt may be a start in the right direction, but it's not a stopping point. Whenever legalism proves insufficient in the face of need, then Jesus showed us that Law must always give way to love.

He showed that true love, true concern, cannot condone the exploitation of others, nor tolerate the affliction of pain. It can't limit basic freedoms due to others, nor attempt to force people to believe as we believe.

True love cannot stand by while others struggle, justify privilege while others starve, or regard some as inferior because they may appear different from us. It cannot be conditional on what another might be able to do for us, now or later.

Love must go the extra mile rather than be limited to the least of our obligation. Love must treat all others with equity simply because they are kin to us in the human family. Love must be practiced as a demonstration of faith rather than only be discussed and debated.

Jesus taught us that we have to look first for the human need in any given situation. Law and life must be brought together. It is against this standard of unconditional love that our actions will ultimately be judged and our faithfulness rewarded.

To live a Christian life means to approach everything with love—a searching love which goes beyond bare minimum and which seeks to respond creatively and fully to those around us. It leads us to take positive action, not just avoiding negative behavior.

If we wish to lead a life pleasing to God we have a model shown by Jesus and practiced by the faithful before us. And it is expressed well in the familiar words of today's scripture: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send this One into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved— through him."

If you wish to follow Jesus, don't you believe it when you hear others say we have no responsibility toward those in need and to just take care of yourself. That's not the Gospel. That's not what Christ taught. That's a convenient message, but not the one brought by our Savior.