

Laying Down the Laws

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A Presbyterian minister in Pennsylvania named William Carter tells this story:

A man I know drove all night to visit a sick brother. It was a long trip. He was tired. It began to rain. About two o'clock in the morning, he drove through a small town. He slowed down to thirty miles an hour. Nobody was on the street, but he knew how small-town cops can be. Suddenly he heard the siren and saw the flashing lights. He pulled over and rolled down the window.

The police officer said, "Mister, did you see that sign back there?"

"What sign?" the man asked.

"School zone—15 miles an hour."

"But Officer, it's two o'clock in the morning."

"Did the sign say, 'School zone except at two o'clock in the morning'?" the officer asked.

"But Officer, it's raining. My windshield wipers aren't working very well."

"Did the sign say, 'School zone except at two o'clock in the morning when your windshield wipers aren't working'? The law is the law."

Now, most laws are in place for good reasons. Most are designed for the common good and to keep us safe. They help us stay within the guardrails, so to speak. And they give us a sense of certainty and refuge from chaos. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't stop and think about them every so often, and be aware of how we're using them.

Today's scripture passage from Matthew comes after Jesus has been criticizing and challenging the Pharisees and other religious leaders for several chapters. They've been trying to trap him with questions such as the one about whether people should pay taxes to Caesar—that's the one Ellen spoke about in her message a couple of weeks ago.

Remember, the Pharisees were known for their strict adherence to Jewish laws and traditions. They wanted ordinary Jews to obey the same laws of purity usually reserved for the priests. Their intention was for those laws to reinforce Jewish identity and faith. The Pharisees didn't have any political power, but they were influential because they took Jewish traditions and laws seriously and made them part of daily life.

For example, there were certain rituals around meals and how food was handled, and tithing, and washing. Their intentions were actually admirable: incorporating their religious beliefs into everyday life as a way for people to remind themselves who they were and to enhance their faithfulness. And you notice that in this passage, Jesus actually tells the people listening to him to

go ahead and do what the Pharisees and other legal experts say. He's not criticizing the laws themselves or the intent behind them, just as he probably wouldn't criticize a law prohibiting us from driving more than fifteen miles an hour in a school zone.

The problem, though, was that the Pharisees' *interpretation* of the laws and the way they carried them out ended up consisting of so many rules and so many details that it became nearly impossible for ordinary folks to remember or follow them. One of the laws forbade working on the Sabbath, which was supposed to be a day of rest—again, not a bad thing by itself. But the Pharisees and legal experts made what one scholar refers to as a “briar patch” of their interpretation of it.

For example, tailors were not allowed to go out carrying a needle late in the day before the Sabbath, in case they were caught with it still in their pocket when the Sabbath began at sundown. How's that for splitting hairs—even worse than being stopped for going thirty miles per hour through the school zone at 2 a.m. You may remember that the Pharisees confronted Jesus when he healed a woman on the Sabbath, because they considered that working. He was relieving the woman's suffering, but for them, the law was more important because, as the police officer said to the driver, the law was the law. They added so many layers of regulations that keeping the law felt like a burden, not like a celebration of God's gifts or a way to respond to God's goodness.

They mistook ritual and tradition for faithfulness. They went through the motions and followed the rules to the letter but without the spirit of compassion, justice, or joy.

As if that weren't bad enough, they got caught up in *looking* good and respectable. And they used the law to build a fence around themselves and their faith—a fence that set them apart and made it hard for ordinary people who were just trying to put food on the table and shoes on their kids' feet to be included. They upgraded themselves to first class with their long tassels and prayer bands, hoping everyone would notice that they were really pious and special.

Unlike the previous passages in Matthew, Jesus isn't talking to the Pharisees or the elites here. He's talking to his disciples and a crowd of people. In other words, he's talking to *us*. Do as the Pharisees say, he says, but not as they do. Follow the law, but make sure you stay within its spirit and that it serves your faith instead of becoming a hollow substitute for it or shutting others out.

Some of you may know Chrissy Cataldo, the pastor at the UCC church in Winslow. In reflecting about this scripture passage, Chrissy writes about the capybara, a big—as in three or four feet long—rodent that lives in Central and South America. It's described as “semi-aquatic,” meaning it spends a lot of time in the water, and is actually a food source for many people. In the past, Roman Catholic practice was to abstain from eating meat on several holy days; now, Catholics

abstain from meat just on Ash Wednesday and on Fridays during Lent. Their traditional alternative to meat has been fish.

But a South American bishop wrote to the pope and said that not eating meat was a real burden for his people, many of whom already had trouble finding enough to eat. They wanted to be able to practice their faith, but this particular law made it hard to do. So the pope studied the capybara and studied the people and decided that because the capybara spent so much time in the water, it was close enough to fish to be declared a fish. What was more important here: strict adherence to doctrine or ensuring people didn't go hungry? This allowed people to practice their faith *and* feed themselves and their families. It's a good example of tempering the "law" with compassion and justice.

What does this mean for us, at Centre Street? Do we let our rituals and habits get in the way of how we experience and live out our faith? Do we let our own "laws" keep us from letting the Spirit move in and among us? Laws can protect us, yes, but do we use them to protect *ourselves* from things like asking questions, stretching beyond our comfort zones, and figuring out what it truly means to love our neighbors? And do we make them into a fence that keeps others out, even when that's not what we intend?

I've heard more than one person say that although they admire and even practice basic Christian values such as kindness and compassion and generosity, they're put off by all the "stuff" of churches or intimidated by the prospect of not knowing what to do once they get through the door. They're afraid they're not good enough for the good "pious" churchgoers inside. Yes, people are responsible for themselves, but that stereotype of churchgoers comes from somewhere, and I hope we don't reinforce it.

When I think of our habits and rituals, I think of certain parts of our worship services that we do differently now from how we did them when I first joined this church years ago. Take Communion, for example. We used to use silver plates for the bread and silver trays specially made to hold the little glass cups, and the deacons brought the bread and juice to us in the pews. It was very choreographed; the deacons tried as much as possible to move through the aisles together to maintain a sense of symmetry. If one was finished serving the sixth row on one side of the sanctuary, she made sure to wait until her fellow deacons were finished serving the sixth row on their side before they all moved to row 7 together.

I joined the deacons around 2004, I think it was, and as one of the younger ones whose knees were still in good shape, I usually ended up serving Robb, the organist. This was back when there was a short wooden wall, or partition, here with a little built-in door. I had to not only climb the steps but open that little door while holding one of those trays of juice in one hand and then take out one of the cups as Robb continued playing. I don't know about the other deacons,

but I had anxiety dreams about helping out with Communion and doing everything “right.” I wish I was kidding.

Then in 2012, when Eric Kelley became our interim pastor, we changed to doing Communion by intinction. Everyone who wants to comes to the table, takes a piece of bread, dips it into the cup, and eats it right then. We still take the bread and juice to folks in the pews who aren’t able or prefer not to come forward, but in both cases, the routine is the same.

We now use blue pottery made by a local artist for our bread and juice. I admit, at first I missed the gleaming silver plates and the elegant silver dome covering the little glasses of juice. I missed the familiar, quiet clinking sound of the cups as people placed them in the little holders attached to the pews when they were finished. But I find Communion a far more powerful and personal experience now. Something about our coming up to the table together, and something about being able to look right into someone’s eyes, whether I know them well or not, makes Communion more intimate and more meaningful.

It allows me to feel more connected, whether I’m serving or being served, and although I know some people may prefer the old way, I hope that it feels more welcoming and less intimidating to most longtime Centre Streeters as well as new folks and visitors. Communion with a capital C is, after all, about “communion.” Having fewer trappings around Communion has allowed me to focus more on its spirit and meaning and less on whether every little detail is “right.”

Another thing we’ve changed over the years is how we collect the offering and the donations for the deacons fund. We used to pass the offering plates during the service, whereas now we just make them available by the door and on the back table on Sunday mornings. That way, people don’t have to feel self-conscious about whether they put something in or let the plate pass them by, or how much they put in, or whatever.

And I’m sure many of us remember when we collected donations to the deacons fund during the last hymn of the service on the first Sunday of the month. Now we have a basket on the back table for the deacons fund. No scrambling for your wallet while singing, no need to feel apologetic or guilty for not having any money on you, no need to assure the deacon, “I’ll put it in after the service.” Giving to the church and donating to the deacons fund are acts of generosity. Financial offerings are one way we express our gratitude for God’s gifts to us and help make this world a better place. The intent is worthy. But we don’t need to be preoccupied with how giving “looks,” or the ritual itself, and no one should feel excluded from participating in it.

I remember years ago my father saying he’d gone to church the previous Sunday and that, when the offering plate was coming around, he got out his wallet and was dismayed to find that all he had was a twenty-dollar bill. Now, this was back in the mid-’70s, when twenty dollars bought a lot more than it does now, and money was always pretty tight in our family. But he felt like he

had to put in something, which was the first problem, so he put in the twenty-dollar bill, consoling himself that at least he was being noble.

Then, he said later, he glanced around and realized to his great disappointment that *no one*, not even the usher, had seen him put that bill in the plate. Everyone else's eyes happened to be focused elsewhere right at that moment. Well, at least he was honest about his ambivalence and able to laugh at himself—and my friends, if we can't use our humor to keep from taking ourselves too seriously when our inner Pharisee appears, we're in real trouble.

Finally, I think that in this scripture passage Jesus is also calling us to ponder how attached we might be to our personal faith habits, and to reexamine them from time to time. Just as a small example, is my praying before meals merely a habit now, after all these years, something I think I *should* do so I can check it off the list and say, “Yup, did that today, didja see that, God?” Or can I take the time to really focus on feeling grateful and giving thanks to God for the food in front of me?

I invite us all to think about where we have grown rigid in our traditions and habits, where we may have built walls to keep others out or keep ourselves “safe,” where we might have grown so enamored of our faith practices that we've forgotten the intention behind them. May our awareness be renewed, and may we be willing to let the spirit breathe new life into us. Amen.