



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON NANCY ROSS, ASSOCIATE TO THE RECTOR
THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST— JUNE 3, 2018
DEUTERONOMY 5:12-15; PSALM 81:2-5, 8-10; 2 CORINTHIANS 4:5-12; MARK 2:23-3:6

LOVE IS THE LAW

MARK 2:23-3:6: *[One sabbath Jesus and his disciples were going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. The Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?” And he said to them, “Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions.” Then he said to them, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath.”]*

Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, “Come forward.” Then he said to them, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” But they were silent. He looked around at them with anger; he was grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him.]

Many of you know that I am a transplant from New York. I love the West Coast, and the Northwest is spectacular, but I am going to tell you, and please don't take this the wrong way, that you are seriously lacking – in Italians. Now I know there are pockets: we frequented North Beach in San Francisco, and there's purportedly a teeny tiny Little Italy here in Seattle. But it's no north side of Poughkeepsie, New York!

There, my grandparents and two aunts lived in the white house with red trim my Dad had been raised in, and we lived just a few blocks away. For all of my early childhood, we would go there for

Sunday dinner. Every Sunday, it was Mass in the morning, spaghetti in the afternoon. What a lovely Sabbath, right? But I will tell you, there was nothing restful about Sunday dinner at Grandma's! That house was bustling! Because it wasn't just spaghetti. It was homemade gravy and meatballs and ziti and garlic bread and salad swimming in oil and vinegar, and cans with black olives to open and put on your fingers – and every once in a while: *braciolis*.

Braciolis are labor-intensive, and one online recipe site calls them “so good they'll make you cry.” They are these small flat pieces of beef that

you make even flatter and tenderer with a meat hammer – I know, ick! – and you put spices and cheese in it, and roll them up and tie them with butcher string, and brown them in a frying pan and then cook them in the tomato sauce for HOURS, until they are so good, you don't even mind if you accidentally eat some of the string.

Sunday was the Lord's day, the Sabbath. But it was not a day of rest in my grandmother and aunts' kitchen, when they got up early to make the braciolis. But there was more love in that work of preparing Sunday dinner than any siren song every sung.

Does it matter?

Well, Deuteronomy (5:12) that we read this morning says it matters. "Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you." It's the LAW.

But what does Jesus do? He goes out and picks grain and heals someone on the Sabbath – right in front of the priests! Jesus, who is called "Rabbi" himself, who is a scholar of Hebrew Scripture, and who has gained notoriety among the people as a holy man, perhaps even a prophet of God. *Why would he do that?*

Well, he said it plainly: Because "humankind was not made for the Sabbath; the Sabbath was made for humankind." God's laws are not given in order to bulk up *God*. God's love created humankind, permeates humankind, and it speaks through the prophets, incarnates in Jesus, for love's sake. God's laws help us to live out and live into the love that God intends for us. The laws are not there for their own sake; they are a means to an end: loving God and loving your neighbor.

We often point to the Pharisees, and to the Old Testament, as times when legalism perverted and

took precedence over God's overriding command to love. The Septuagint, the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament that we have, translated the Hebrew word *Torah* with the Greek word *nomos* ("law"). But reducing the fulsomeness of a word that probably described the living culture and traditions of the people into a narrow word like "law" has led us to think of *Torah* as legalistic.

But "Torah was often compared to fire, water, wine, oil, milk, honey, drugs, manna, the tree of life, and many other things; it was considered the source of freedom, goodness, and life; it was identified both with wisdom and with love."¹ That is the language of faith that Jesus was raised in, and that Jesus spoke. Legalism is not so much a law problem; legalism is an interpretation problem, and it is one that we share equally with the ancients, despite all the biblical scholarship of two millennia. Jesus calls out the Pharisees for it when they missed the point. We need to hear him, and call ourselves out when WE miss the point.

Jesus focused on the law of abounding love. He says the whole Law and the Prophets hang on loving God and loving neighbor (Matthew 22). It would have been cleaner, perhaps, if he had laid out some new laws as a formula to salvation, which is how many people have tried, and continue to try, to shoehorn it – how many people have tried to fit Jesus' word into a tiny box. But Jesus shows us that legalism is not just not his way, it is wrong-headed, as time and time again he rails against legalistic religious leaders: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 23:13) "For you tithe mint,

dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith.” (Matthew 23:23) And he challenges legalism in the Gospel we heard today: “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?”

That’s not a lesson about “Sabbath.” It’s an example of acting in love by responding in the Spirit. Jesus does not tell us we are to be without law; law is a gift that should help us live in community, in right relationship with each other, in ever-growing mindfulness and heartfulness of God. Deeper and deeper faith. The Pharisees too often wielded the law as a cudgel against the people – and ultimately, against Jesus – and we too often do the same with our laws, and our personal self-righteousness.

But Jesus makes clear, over and over, that LOVE is the basis of the law, and the aim of the law, and the most important summation of the law. If there is a choice between letter of the law and love, Jesus acts in love.

The love he is talking about, and showing us, doesn’t fit tight boundaries. Love is messy, and it doesn’t seek to control. We humans don’t like that. We WANT to be in control, or at least to create the illusion and convince ourselves that we’re the ones in control – that if we obey all the rules, we will be God’s favorite and nothing bad can happen to us. Because it’s scary out here on planet Earth!

We don’t think we ascribe to a perverse “Prosperity Gospel” kind of faith, but somewhere inside, we want to believe that we can control God, that we can point to the rules and force God’s hand to answer our prayers the way WE want them answered. But it’s an immature faith that seeks to control.

I think about the Rule of St. Benedict, from Esther de Waal’s book *Seeking God* that many of us are reading here this summer. We think of ancient monasteries as austere, where the monks or sisters lived by a strict, even stifling Rule. And indeed, as de Waal writes, “The idea of order and balance runs through the organization of the monastery... [but]: **“The Rule is to create the favourable environment in which the balanced life may flourish.”**”² And: “The whole of one’s life must be open to the possibility of change...not for a static keeping of the Rule but for an open and free response to the challenges with which God will face us.”³

It’s living in that contradiction, that tension: yes, rules and laws, but never a static life – because change – really, transformation – is our life’s call, and challenges to love will come, and we will have to think for ourselves and act – not just abdicate to a set of rules!

Ah, but there’s the further rub. If I can’t point to a narrow, static, absolute rule, how can I prove that I’m right and you’re wrong? MY way of doing Sabbath, MY way of naming God, MY way of marriage, MY way of doing things, MY right to own things. How can I control you, and control my own fate, if the rules are not a formula? It’s scary to not be in control of the rules and their outcomes.

But Jesus gives us the answer to this challenging life. **And the answer he gives is his own life**, and he gives it in the fullness of love. He does not abolish the Sabbath, but he does heal the withered hand on the Sabbath. He does not hide from the pain that answering to love brings: When Jesus said to the man, “Stretch out your hand” and he restored it to health, the Pharisees went out

and immediately conspired against him, how to destroy him. Jesus knew that.

So did Jesus go to the cross in a quibble about the Sabbath? No. He went to the cross for the same reason he came in the flesh: for LOVE.

When we don't think of our laws from the framework of faith and trust in God, we rely on our own agency as mightiest, and we forget that we are dependent on the Spirit. That's when law and religion degenerate into legalistic tools to control one another – and to try to control the world around us. And to all of us who have tried to control the people and events in our own lives, we know that is a recipe for disappointment at best and disaster at times. Because we are not in control.

But, listen, isn't that the Good News? That God's love is at work; it's not all on us!

The faithful life balances on having God at the center. There are still chores to do around the monastery and the apartment. And braciolis to make on the Sabbath with exuberant love. There is still study to do, because thinking about the Word of God reveals so much to us, is the way God can speak to us with powerful surprise sometimes. There is still praying to do, because

unless we focus our attention on the center, we spin off into the fringes. There is still silence to do; because only in silence can we truly listen. But all of it, all of the working, the study, the praying, the silence, all of it is to be a practice rooted in living out the love of God that is in each of us, and that Jesus himself showed us. It doesn't look like a rulebook; living it can be pretty messy. But that messiness is the fertile ground of growth in the Spirit, the “open and free response to God.”

God at the center. Deeper than rules, bigger than words, recognized in ways that defy tiny boxes. That is the life of Jesus – and the life we look to live, in Jesus.

¹ “Judaism – The Written Law: Torah,” Jewish Virtual Library, accessed May 30, 2018 at www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-written-law-torah.

² de Waal, Esther. *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict*. Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press. 1984. p. 86.

³ Ibid. p. 369.



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