

Legalism and the Law

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2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17 and Luke 20:27-40

I want to share a deep word of gratitude to all of you for your words of support and enthusiasm as we move toward my endorsement as a candidate for Moderator of the 221st General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Even saying that feels a bit odd. Many have asked, “what can we do to be of support.” We will have some opportunities to think about all of that, most likely after the first of the year. Right now, what I need is your prayers, for wisdom and patience and clarity and grace. It’s all very exciting and very humbling at the same time. So your prayers would be very welcome, with your ongoing support, and my ongoing gratitude.

The late Sally Clapp chided me one time for waiting until Stewardship Sunday to preach a stewardship sermon. Her point, made in a very friendly way, was that she wanted that sermon to help give shape to her response. I argued back, again in a friendly way, that I wouldn’t want a less than effective sermon to be the cause for her to decrease her pledge. She assured me that it wouldn’t. And I hope that is the case this morning. Not a full blown stewardship sermon – that will come next week. But a brief preview.

Our theme, so successful last year, is again “By Whose Bounty All are Blessed.” We sing it every Sunday, but it’s more than an offering response. It is a theological affirmation, a faith statement. God’s bounty blesses us in so many, many ways. And we, in kind, are called to share that bounty in many, many ways.

The hopes of the Stewardship Committee are twofold this year. The first is around *participation*. Just under half of us pledge. I am no statistician, but I can tell you two things. The first is that that’s near the national average for churches like ours. The second thing is that it’s nothing to write home about. What we really aspire to is greater and greater participation as a sign of congregational connection and health, so if you have never pledged, please make this the year.

So the first word is participation. The second word is *capacity*. Every pledge matters, and pledging is a very personal thing. My firm belief is that we stretch ourselves when we decide about how much we give. At the same time, we also know that at whatever level we give, many are able to give more. You’ve told me that, and it’s also indicated when we look at pledging patterns over the years, when some of us have plateaued. So if you can stretch more, increase your capacity, do so. Our financial vitality and sustainability can certainly use such a response.

And thank you in advance for your response next week as you bring your pledge cards to church and offer them as a symbol of God’s bounty and your response.

Do you remember “blue laws?” We’ve separated church and state in this nation, but for many decades the state cooperated with religion, and especially mainline religion, to allow faith to be practiced. Blue laws kept businesses and other functions closed on Sundays in order, ostensibly, to encourage church-going. We Presbyterians, in the 19th and early 20th century, were both practitioners and proponents. We urged legislators to prohibit commerce from happening on Sundays. Sabbath-keeping, we called it. And then, slowly, we changed our minds. Our commitment to the Sabbath eroded, and some would say, so did our commitment to the values it represented.

Some of us will remember when it was unthinkable to do anything on a Sunday but go to church, head home for a family meal, take a long drive, perhaps go to church again, and then prepare for the beginning of the week. We wouldn’t shop for groceries, and if a movie was playing or a ball game was happening, we wouldn’t dream of participating or playing. No more. We now get annoyed if Wegman’s is closed at all, and weekend ball games or hockey games or swim meets or whatever – some of them scheduled on Sunday mornings – are simply a way of life. Families here make choices, and it’s not my job to criticize those choices – we’ve made them ourselves.

My point this morning is to note the shift, a shift of many shifts. And I am not saying it’s all bad, in an odd way. When the choice was forced, when we didn’t have anything to do on a Sunday BUT go to church, when the cultural expectation demanded religious participation, was our heart in it? Now, with religion more at the fringe, are we here not because we are expected to be here, but because we feel called and led? It’s not a foolproof theory. Some of us are here now voluntarily because at one point we came involuntarily – practices imposed earlier because habits later. That’s good.

But my larger point isn’t really about blue laws at all, or changing cultural realities around religious practices. What I am most interested in this morning is the belief that drove blue laws in the first place. A commandment, one of the ten. “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.” God told our forebears that, and blue laws were one way to live that commandment out.

Whether we pick up a prescription at CVS on a Sunday or not, or play cards, or sneak down to the office for a few hours, the deeper question is not about day and time, but about spirit. How do we rest? How do we observe Sabbath, in a 24/7 world? And more so, how do we follow what God asks us to do, whether resting, or giving, or caring, without turning our efforts into a convoluted mess.

Jesus spends much of his ministry confounding his detractors. He picks grain on the Sabbath because his followers are hungry. He heals on the Sabbath because a person is in crisis. He is constantly criticized as a law breaker; when, in fact, he insists that he is fulfilling the spirit of the law, if not the letter, by doing what he was doing – teaching, feeding, and healing. Nearly everything Jesus did broke a religious law or defied religious convention.

The religious authorities confront him again this morning. They are comical to be sure, up to the ridiculous point when we remember that it’s their constant harassment that would lead Jesus to his death. This morning the topic is not Sabbath but marriage. They pose a ludicrous scenario. A woman

marries a man, who dies. She marries the brother, as was the custom. This repeats itself for a total of seven times. The cheeky person that I am would question brothers 5 or 6 or 7 – if they know what was coming might they have avoided matrimony altogether. Apparently she was a good catch!

But the Sadducees' question is even more ridiculous. In heaven, they wondered aloud, whose wife will the woman be? Legalism gone off the deep end, though taken very seriously. Jesus dismisses the question out of hand. In heaven, he says, human understandings about life and death and relationships are transformed. Your question has no merit, and I will not attempt to answer it.

We are told that observers appreciated the wisdom of the response. We are also told that the Sadducees were unhappily shut up at that point, though we know their conspiring would continue.

Charles Cousar writes that in the face of an insincere attempt to embarrass Jesus, he uncovers the insincerity of the Sadducees. "Their strategy of posing trick questions not only had failed, it had backfired, leaving Jesus as the lone authoritative figure." (*Texts for Preaching, Year A*, pages 593-595)

Which is the point. Religion at the outset of the twenty-first century is a work in progress. When you read about religion in the papers or online, it is often about sexual misconduct or some other internal scandal. We are not helping ourselves. Nor are we helping ourselves with the legacy of legalism. We took what Jesus offered and made a set of rules and regulations – about Sabbath, about money, about grace itself. Do this or do that and be saved. Do this or do that and be damned.

And by so doing, we missed the greater point. The Ten Commandments weren't about running a tight ship. They were about giving shape to community life. Of course we will honor and respect our elders, our property, our vows. To turn that communal framework into a convoluted list of do's and don'ts is to miss the point. The law doesn't save us – God does. The law is a means to guide our life, to provide guidance and shape. A gracious God wouldn't condemn us for working on the Sabbath. A gracious God, however, would seek to nurture us into a life that provides time for rest and reflection and communal connection, and, of course, worship. The same is true for every law.

One time Jesus quoted the Old Testament: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself." He added that last part. What that looks like will be as different for you as it will be for me. But I can tell you that to keep that vision in front of you – love that summarizes every law of faith and trumps any notion of legalism – will be to change your life, the lives of those around you, and even the life of the world. And it just might save you – starting now! Amen.