

***“Be Observant, Not Obsessed”***

If you have never traveled on I-40 between Asheville, North Carolina and Knoxville, Tennessee you have denied yourself a true adventure. In that stretch of highway, about 90 miles in total, there is a section where the road takes a 3-to-5-degree downward slope for more than twenty miles. There is something a little unnerving about traveling at 60 miles-per-hour on that kind of slant. It is made even more unnerving by the fact that this road keeps twisting and turning around the Great Smokey Mountains — three times on westbound I-40 I wound up traveling due east!

Then there is the last little item with which to contend — semis. Regularly posted on this extended runaway zone are signs that read *“Trucks with more than three axles prohibited from the left lane.”* There are only the left and right lanes, so the options are fairly clear-cut. I had my car on cruise control, which was helping to keep it at 60. The truckers did not have that option, nor (on some stretches) could they use the “engine brake.” So, guess who wanted to exceed the speed limit in the right lane? It wasn’t I. Oh, one other complicating matter — in North Carolina the rule is *“Travel right, pass left.”* Well on I-40 there will be one Chevy Equinox for the next three years that will be sticking to the left lane and letting the semis have free rein to exceed the speed limit and pass on the right.

*“Rules are made to be broken,”* runs an old adage. As a general rule, we don’t buy that. We tend to think that rules have purposes and, if those purposes make sense to us, we have no problem adhering to the rule.

I was at Macedonia City Hall in the Building Department. This was not the reason for my visit there, but I inquired about the possibility of erecting a fence in my back yard. The ordinance then was: no fence may be more than one-third of the distance away from the house than the house is distant from the road (in other words, for the sixty-foot setback for my house, the fence can be no more than twenty feet from the house.

This rule does not make sense to me; and when I asked the inspector why that was the rule, all he could say was, “*That’s the way the ordinance is written.*” I’m not about to break that rule; I can live without a decorative fence on my property. But I think it’s a stupid rule, in part because nobody can say why this is the rule.

Today’s Gospel is not about stupid rules. It is, at least in part, about God’s Law.

In the aftermath of the Exile, the Jewish nation went through something of a transformation. When Jerusalem was sacked, the Temple destroyed, all the nobles and other leaders carried off to Babylon, questions racked the collective mind of Israel: “*Did our God lose?*” “*Were the Babylonian gods more powerful than He?*” “*Where is God now?*” “*If God is still God, how can we worship Him without a Temple?*” “*We have no land, no king — what will become of us?*”

The Exilic prophets (those who went into exile with the people) were exceedingly important in helping to answer those questions and assure the people of God that He continued reign and love for them. But for the question, “*Why did this happen?*” it was the voices of the pre-Exilic prophets that began to echo in their ears. If you read the prophets like Hosea, Amos, the early chapters of Isaiah, and Jeremiah you will get a sense of what they finally decided was worthy of their attention. They certainly had not paid attention when these prophets were speaking. But because there was a written record (preserved now also to us), they could go back and see what had been said.

Much of that was in the form of what is called by scholars a “covenant lawsuit.” Just this snippet from Amos will give you a taste:

***Thus says the LORD:  
For three transgressions of Judah,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;  
because they have rejected the law of the LORD,  
and have not kept his statutes,***

*but they have been led astray by the same lies  
after which their ancestors walked.  
So I will send a fire on Judah,  
and it shall devour the strongholds of Jerusalem.* (2:4-5)

What developed during and after the Exile was the awareness that the Exile came about because Israel had not paid attention, had not observed, and had not honored God's Law — His covenant with Israel. The watchword became: "*Never again! We will be super-observant of all that God has spoken to us.*"

So they set up rules to help them keep the rules. If the Law said, "*When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien . . .*" (Leviticus 19:9-10) then there had to be some interpretation to ensure that this was observed. What is meant by "edges"? How far from the edge is permissible? How many of the grapes is enough? So rules on top of rules on top of interpretations of those rules, and stories illustrating the rules poured out from the scholars, the rabbis. Eventually (about 200 years after Jesus), all these rules would be codified in what today is known as The Talmud.

In Jesus' time, the rules were maintained by the watchdogs of the faith — the Pharisees and the Sadducees. We don't hear much about the Sadducees in the Gospels (only once in Luke and Mark, three times in Matthew, none in John). But we encounter the Pharisees a lot — and more often than not, the Pharisees come into play when there is something about the Law going on. Such is the case in today's narrative.

The disciples were hungry, and so they ate. Every mother wishes that they had, but they didn't wash their hands before supper. The issue here is not cleanliness with regard to germs and eating; they didn't know anything about germs, much less that they could somehow taint one's food. No, the issue was "the tradition of the elders," which Mark has encapsulated quite briefly: "*. . . the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not*

*eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.*” Mark probably put that in because his Gentile readers would have been flummoxed by this whole debate over eating with “defiled hands.”

Here’s where this inheritance from the Exile shows its down side. The post-Exile thrust to know and remember God’s Law was a good thing . . . at first. It helped the Jews get their heads back in the game, so to speak. But by the time of Jesus, there were so many traditions that one could not possibly observe them all. The copy of the Talmud I used to have on my shelves encompassed eighteen volumes — very thin pages, very small print. It would take months just to read them all, much less know at the end of that reading everything you had read.

Here’s what the Pharisees taught (and why they are so upset by the behavior of the disciples): *“If for one day everyone in Israel would keep the Law (and that meant every rule), then the Messiah would come.”* So, for them, this eating with defiled hands was not an issue of social graces, nor even a matter of legalistic nitpicking — in their eyes, the disciples were keeping at bay the arrival of the Messiah.

Note how Jesus comes at the problem. He does not, as He well could have, suggest that their fears are groundless since the Messiah was already standing right before them. No, instead He tries to help them see that they are basing their lives on a faulty premise. He does so by quoting Isaiah, who is both a pre-Exilic and an Exilic prophet, and one very much accepted by the Pharisees: *“This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”*

The issue under debate here is not God’s Law, but human traditions. All this piling up of rules and regulations cannot be at the center of one’s faith. Jesus wants them to know: What matters most is not what’s in the book, but what is in the heart. When you are a follower of rules, when

this is your orientation toward life, you never really have to look inside. This is one of the reasons why fundamentalist churches grow: When you have someone telling you what to do, what to say, what to think, what to feel — it lifts all of the burden from your shoulders; but, when you then face a personal dilemma for which no one has provided a rule, you're sunk! Because you don't know how to think and feel and thus decide what to do and say. Besides, it is impossible to have a relationship based on rules, and faith is all about relationship.

Are rules then to be cast aside? No! Rules can be very helpful. If, for example, you know that your spouse is aggravated every time you leave your coat on the back of the kitchen chair, whether it is stated or unstated, there will be a rule about hanging up coats in the hall closet. You will know that rule, because you will know the consequences of failing to observe that rule.

Our lives are full of such regulation. Some of them are quite intentional, like the traffic signals at the corner of Routes 14 and 43 — intended to help keep traffic flowing smoothly and to protect people as they come and go. Other regulations make no sense, at least not our times; for example, my sister and her then boyfriend (later her husband) were ticketed by an officer in Truro, Massachusetts (on Cape Cod) for walking down the sidewalk holding hands. Rules can be good, stupid, ineffective, ignored, misunderstood, helpful, annoying, and necessary, at times. Rules may help to negotiate your way through a relationship, but they cannot bring about a relationship. Jesus teaches the crowd, and us, “. . . *there is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile.*”

It has been suggested that Jesus is saying that there are no longer any food codes . . . we can eat anything. Well, clearly we have chosen to take the position with St. Paul that, in His death and resurrection, Jesus “*has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances,*” (Ephesians 2:15) and that includes the food ordinances. But that is not the point Jesus is making here. Here Jesus is articulating a principle that rules cannot

protect you finally from what goes on in the human heart. He says, “. . . *it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.*”

Now, there are rules against theft, murder, slander, and some forms of deceit. There used to be many rules against fornication, adultery, and licentiousness (which was the basis for the Cape Cod hand-holding restriction), but these are regarded as relics of a Puritanical past, and are dumped into the historical bin called “blue laws.” Have you ever heard of a law regarding avarice? Or wickedness? Or envy? Or pride? Or folly? How would you devise a law that would keep foolish people from acting foolishly? And if such laws were on the books, would we not have to build prisons for just about every man, woman, and child in this culture?

No, laws cannot get at heart problems. The problem for the Pharisees was not that they had rules and regulations — we all do. No, the problem was that they obsessed over their laws . . . and be clear on this, they were their laws, not God’s Law.

If you go back into the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy and study the many regulations set forth by God you will discover that we could benefit from many of them today. You can skip past all the rules for the priests and Levites. Unless you keep livestock, you can pass those by, too. But the food laws, the behavioral laws, the laws about treatment of neighbors, the poor, the sojourner . . . there is a lot there to put into practice. Even Jesus observed the Law. So we can have a go at it, as well.

But . . .

First, do not imagine that observing these rules can or will put you right with God — only the Son can bring you to the Father.

Second, do not think that scoring high on the rules test gets you anywhere . . . what rules are there are for your benefit, not for your success over someone else.

Third, never confuse keeping rules with acting in love — they are not the same.

The Pharisees were “good people.” They followed the rules, mowed their lawns, didn’t toss out litter on the highways, never got drunk and disorderly. We most likely would appreciate having a Pharisee as a neighbor (especially if the neighbor you have now lets his dogs use your lawn for their business, leaves his trash cans on the street for days, lets the newspapers pile up in the driveway, hasn’t trimmed his bushes in twelve years, and revs his motorcycle in the driveway for hours). Good people follow the rules.

No, the issue for the Pharisees was not that they were bad; they were wrong. They had determined to take a stand on a platform that had no foundation. They thought that outward behaviors were key. Jesus teaches us otherwise: Look within. Check out your heart. If you can find little or no passion for God within, no rules on the outside will matter. How deeply, how profoundly, how intensely you hunger for God, to be in His presence, to know Him intimately . . . that’s what matters.

There are no rules to govern such things, save the rule to love God with all your heart, all your mind, all your strength and to let that love then lead you to love the neighbor as well.

Amen.