

Law and Love

Perhaps you have been following the drama unfolding as our Roman Catholic brothers struggle with issues of law and love, especially as these two foundation stones of the faith, law and love, impact the modern family.

They are hip deep in many of the same discussions that our own Anglican community has wrestled with over the last 40 years, often, like us, with the same hurtful words being tossed about, often with dialog degenerating into accusations and condemnations.

Law and love.

It's a tricky business.

It's what is at the core of today's rather odd gospel lesson, which begins with a snarky lawyer (is there any other kind, you ask?) trying to trip up Jesus yet again.

Last week they came after him about taxes and whether or not to pay them.

Next came the trick question about the woman who married seven brothers — whose wife would she be after the resurrection?

And now today, the lawyer asking Jesus to rank the most important of the 631 laws of God — knowing full well that Jewish tradition says there can be no ranking — if God makes laws, then all laws are equal.

What Jesus does with this challenge is a beautiful thing to behold.

In a way, he picks up a pair of glasses, and puts them on, and says something like this: "all law is intended to be seen and understood and followed and interpreted and obeyed through the lens of love - love of God being the right lens and love of your brothers and sisters being the left lens."

And so when we wrestle with the law that says people of the same gender having sexual relations is an abomination — things change when we look at that law through the lens of love.

What comes into focus is that when that Biblical law was written down, it was NOT speaking about people of the same gender living in committed, self-sacrificing, loving relationships.

Instead, it was speaking of wealthy men preying on young boys, or engaging in sex for the sake of the sex, demeaning and dehumanizing the participants; so of course when that type of behavior is viewed through the lens of love – of course it is an abomination – just as any sexual relationship engaged in without love and commitment and sacrifice falls short of who we are called to become.

Just so, a committed, giving, and loving relationship between two people, irrespective of gender, seen through the lens of love, is something to be blessed, something to be welcomed.

And this is the point it seems that Jesus wishes to make with our lawyer today.

Every rule, every expectation, every prohibition, every command is given life and breathes and inspires and guides us all from the rootstock of love.

Without love there is only lifeless, arbitrary, and power-driven law; which is why, as we discovered weeks ago, Jesus gives us the power to bind and loose all rules and traditions and laws (Mt 16:19-20) – precisely because life changes, societies change, human relations change – so that a living law, lived through and interpreted according to the lens of love, lived through and interpreted through the Spirit of the living God – can and must change as well.

Only through the lens of love, the love of God and of each other, can we see clearly to decide what needs to be bound and what needs to be loosed.

God is not finished with us yet!

There are some among us who were born in an age when women could not vote, much less aspire to answer God's call to ordained life; we are only a few generations removed from a time when African-Americans were deemed to be three-fifths of a human being, and in my lifetime, it was illegal for persons of different races to marry one another in many of these United States.

Law and love: it tests us every day, especially perhaps when we get right down to debating what it is that God wishes for us.

Listen to just a smattering of the comments that flew around this last weekend as the brothers in Rome tried to find a way forward through their own tangle of law and love:

"This is why I left the Catholic Church and don't care about organized religion. Who are we to judge who other people love???"

"That is NOT being judgmental, it is letting God's word be the judge."

"You mean that collection of notes and scraps written by men and collected over several centuries and then voted upon by another group of men that somehow then became the actual Word Of God?"

"Deuteronomy says you should stone disobedient children? Should we warn child protective services about you?"

"I do not want to go to an Homophobic Heaven, that wasn't in Christ's teachings."

And so it goes....

I think that snarky lawyer was trying to draw Jesus into just such an exchange; but of course, wearing the glasses of love, Jesus sidesteps the pitched and fraught attacks and gently leads us to catch a glimpse of the world as God always intended it to be.

And that's what brings us to the last part of the gospel — that odd and obscure discussion about who the Messiah is in relation to King David.

Maybe your eyes glazed over at that part, maybe they are glazing over right now!

Who cares about this inside baseball of Jewish religious thinking?

Well, we probably ought to care.

Because what Jesus seems to be getting at is this: The Jewish people expected the Messiah to be David's son, and as the son, to follow in the father's footsteps: to be the Arnold Schwarzenegger of Israel and to root out the outsiders, to establish forever the lines between good and bad, clean and unclean, us and them.

But Jesus tells them that the Messiah is not a chip off the old block: the Messiah is something altogether new; bringing into existence a world that is not made up of insiders and outsiders, but a world that welcomes every last one of us.

And perhaps Jesus is saying something like that to us as well.

That Jesus, he whom through all things are created, has a reach far broader than the laws of our church as he gathers together so many who are beyond the reach of the church — that the lens of love is determined to have us all: Christian and Jew, Hindu and Buddhist; straight and gay; every creed and no creed, all are the beloved children of this God who makes all things, who makes all people, new.

I leave you with this.

It is the imagining of a self-hating, rock bottom, lost it all alcoholic who, in a drunken speech spoken to no one, says this about the final judgment of God:

"And he will judge and forgive them all, the good and the evil, the wise and the meek.

And when he is done with all of them, then he will summon us.

'You too come forth ye drunkards, come forth ye weak ones, come forth ye children of shame.'

And we shall all come forth without shame and shall stand before him.

And he will say to us: 'You are swine made in the image of the beast and with his mark. But come ye also.'

And the wise ones and those with understanding will say:

'O Lord, why dost thou receive these men?'

And he will say:

'This is why I receive them, O ye of understanding.

Not one of them believed himself to be worthy of this!'

And he shall hold out his hands to us and we shall fall down before him.....and we shall weep....and we shall understand all things and all will be understood."

Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment*.

Law and love.

In the end, there is only love.

+amen

