

NO LAW BUT LOVE[©]

a sermon by Dan Saperstein
Holly Presbyterian Church
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Texts: Deuteronomy 5:6-21, Mark 2:23-3:6

If there is a single motion picture scene which summarized the attitude of the 1960s – that tumultuous and often divisive time in our society in which many of us grew up, it was the scene in the movie *Five Easy Pieces* in which Jack Nicholson's character enters a roadside diner and is trying to order an omelet with wheat toast. The waitress, who represents a society that has lost its bearings in a sea of rules that make no sense, points out to him that wheat toast is not on the menu. Surely, they have wheat bread, and a toaster, he asks. Well, yes, but they don't serve wheat toast. Well, then, he presses, how about an omelet and a chicken salad sandwich on wheat toast? Oh, they could serve that, she said. Fine, he replies, I'll have that... only hold the lettuce, hold the mayo... and hold the chicken salad! The scene ends with a frustrated waitress ordering Nicholson out of the diner, and a more frustrated Nicholson clearing the table in a rage.

It might be trivial to say that the Kingdom of God is a social order in which you can walk into a restaurant and order wheat toast, but when you think about it, there might be more to that sentiment than meets the eye. In this country, not so long ago, there were restaurants in which whole races of people could not walk in and order *anything*, much less wheat toast. And even today, there are restaurants where it is impossible for a disabled person even to enter, much less order. Depending on the context, an order of wheat toast can be a dangerous, even a subversive act, an act with powerful symbolic value that denotes a broader vision of freedom and justice.

So, when the disciples of Jesus infuriated the Pharisees by plucking grain and threshing it in their hands when they were hungry on the Sabbath, it was an act with greater symbolic meaning. When Jesus similarly outraged the Pharisees by entering the synagogue on the Sabbath and healing a man with a withered hand, it too was an act with greater symbolic meaning.

The Pharisees, you may recall, were strict observers of the Law of Moses, who so valued the scriptures that they "put a fence around the Law" by enforcing very detailed and restrictive applications of the scriptures in order

to prevent any possibility of sinning. But their detailed prohibitions had other effects as well: putting all things - people, places, things, even time itself - into classes of "clean" and "unclean," "holy" and "sinful." These purity boundaries defined their world much as similar boundaries defined social attitudes and behaviors between the races in Apartheid South Africa or the castes in pre-modern India. Violating purity codes creates a reaction of revulsion and anger in our deepest selves that we can't rationally explain, such as the Supreme Court justice who said in a famous decision, "I can't define what is obscene, but I know it when I see it."

On the surface, it would seem that such minor violations as rubbing the chaff off a few kernels of wheat and telling a man to stretch out his hand (yes, that's all Jesus does) would not justify plotting a person's death, as Mark indicates the Pharisees began to do. But it wasn't the actions themselves so much as the way of thinking and living they represented that caused such antipathy.

It was the same way of living and thinking that provoked such hatred towards a Rosa Parks for taking a seat at the front of the bus, or towards those who sat at lunch counters in Woolworths. These deeply ingrained purity codes allow us to categorize others in dehumanizing terms: vermin, animals, demonic, defiled. They inform our unconscious assumptions and actions about race, gender, sexuality, even music and food.

Sometimes, the Kingdom of God is about wheat toast.

The Jesus of Mark's gospel is a Jesus of action and conflict. The two scenes in our gospel reading complete a series of five episodes in which Jesus enters into conflict with the religious and secular authorities of Galilee. Each episode tells how Jesus or his disciples cross one of the central social and religious boundaries of Judaism as practiced by the Pharisees. And they all hang, like sculptures on a mobile, from the central saying of Jesus that new wine belongs in new wineskins - that he is inaugurating a new kind of social order for the new life he is bringing, an order based on compassionate justice that serves human need rather than defining people as "clean" or "unclean," "in" or "out," "righteous" and "sinners."

Jesus is radical, in the original sense of the word, in that he returns to the *radix*, or root, of Law of Moses. His references to the Sabbath being made

for humankind, and to the lawfulness of saving or killing life strike at the central meaning of the Jewish law. Jesus understood that the essence of the law is found in the dual commandments to Love the Lord your God with your whole self, and to love your neighbor as you love yourself. "On these two," he once said, "hang all the law and the prophets." In fact, when the Pharisees are silent when Jesus challenges them whether it is lawful to save life on the Sabbath, it says Jesus looked at them with anger – the only time that word is used of Jesus in all the gospels.

You see, the *commands* of God are always predicated on the *compassion* of God. The Ten Commandments, for example, begins with the reminder that the Lord is the God who rescued the people from slavery in Egypt. They are intended to preserve justice and liberty, and not oppose them. Any application of the law, then, that does not affirm life and wholeness is a violation of their very essence.

We Presbyterians have another way of saying that in our foundational principles of government. We say "truth is in order to goodness." In other words, nothing is true or right that produces evil or injustice.

Whenever in our zeal to be holy we detach the commands of God from the compassion of God, we pervert the very purpose of the Law, and violate both God and our neighbor. The problem is, we sometimes fix our eyes so narrowly on the commandment - the "wheat toast," if you will – that we forget the compassion upon which it rests.

Writer Clarence Harvey tells the story of a pet goldfish he had as a child: One summer as I was packing to spend three months with relatives at the lake up north, my dad said, "Take this goldfish with you. I don't want to take care of it this summer."

One day after we got up to the lake, I decided to become a liberator. I went down to the dock with my fishbowl and gave my fish a little talk. "I am going to throw you in this lake," I said. "You will be free. You can eat well here and grow up to be a big fish." But when I put the goldfish in the water at the end of the dock, it stayed right there. I backed off, thinking the fish was attached to my shadow. But when I moved back to be sure it was gone, it was still right there. I even threw a stone into the water to scare it away, but that goldfish just swam around it.

When I came back after lunch, the goldfish was still there, swimming in the same spot. I sat down and thought, "That fish should be free. It's got the whole lake to swim in." Suddenly, I saw a big ripple in the water - a huge ripple. Whop! A big bass swallowed my little goldfish.

Later in life someone told me that a goldfish, once it has lived in a circumference of a certain size, has been conditioned to think small. It will stay there until it dies - swimming around in that small circle.¹

The Pharisees, and other literalists and legalists, practice a fishbowl kind of religion before an ocean-hearted God. Their vision is narrow, and so while they think they are free, they are really in bondage. Jesus embodies the larger vision, and invites us to see it and live it. He called that vision the Kingdom of God. When God is in charge, he says, there is no law against feeding the hungry or healing the sick or welcoming the outcast or forgiving the sinner. That is the essence of what it means to be holy or godly.

The media circus was abuzz this week over how comedian Samantha Bee used a horrible epithet to describe first daughter Ivanka Trump. There is no defending her language. The word she used does not belong in civil discourse. But all the attention drawn to the epithet has had the effect of diverting our gaze from what prompted her unfortunate choice of words: the inhumane application of an immigration policy that forcibly separates children as young as 12 months old from their mothers who are legally seeking asylum.

The director of one group trying to stop this said, "We met a terrified six-year-old blind boy taken from his mother at the border. All he did was beg for his mother. If we cannot represent him, he will stand in front of a judge and represent himself, since there is no public defender system in immigration court, even for children. So will the 12-month old baby we met - stripped from her inconsolable mother's arms. So will the 58 other children living in that children's detention center in the middle of Arizona right now, all under the age of 10, all afraid and desperate for their mothers and fathers."²

¹ <http://www.mykairos.org/docs/pr/eneews-devotional-16.pdf>

² Lauren Dasse, Esq., Florence Project, multiple online sources

Our current policy – it is executive policy and not law – changes our historic practice of treating immigration violations as civil — rather than criminal — offenses. Historically, families were, at worst, detained together, or they were released with notice to appear at a later court hearing.

The policy now is to treat all border crossings – even legal requests for asylum such as these – as criminal, not civil offenses. The stated goal of 100% criminal prosecution will mean 100% family separation. Last week, a Border Patrol official testified that 658 children were taken from their parents in just two weeks in May. Experts have called the trauma inflicted on children a form of torture.³

I have met women and children seeking asylum at the Annunciation House shelter in El Paso. They have fled life and death situations, weathered tragedy and abuse, to find a refuge for their families. They are not terrorists, or rapists, or murderers. They are not animals. They are not criminals. They are women and children fearing for their lives.

Those who are more concerned about uncivil language than inhumane treatment of children do not know the law of God. Those who take an infant from its mother's arms because our government criminalizes a one-year old do not practice God's justice. The kingdom of God is not about words or invisible lines on the earth. It's about wheat toast – and disregarding the menu, if necessary, to see that all God's children are fed at the welcome table of God's love.

There is another denomination that boasts the motto, "No creed but Christ... no law but love." Those are sentiments very much in line with Mark's gospel.

Sometimes it seems like so much of the church is hung up on the menu. We fail to see the larger vision, the compassionate response to human need. When we try to defend Jesus at the expense of the people he died to save, we crucify him all over again.

Instead, let us expand our vision to include our neighbor in need, and

³ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/05/30/stop-separating-immigrant-families-editorials-debates/654844002/>)

remember that God has no law against doing what is just and loving and good, no matter when it is done, or to whom. Amen.

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