

Of Laws, Rules and Requirements... Message for June 13, 2010

I remember seeing a television ad as a young woman during the Vietnam War days – it encouraged young men to register for the draft, because, “It’s the law.” The way the ad was presented sounded almost threatening to me, and I remember thinking, “Boy, I sure wouldn’t like to disobey that one.” As we know, the times were turbulent and many did disobey that law – but I definitely got the message in that ad.

Our society needs and is defined by rules and laws (written and unwritten) that guide our behaviors in community – our lives would be chaotic if we didn’t rein humans in a little and manage our interactions. We seem to instinctively feel the need to define guidelines – the first thing many organizations do when they come together initially is create some type of order, with rules or bylaws to follow - and then they appoint someone to uphold those rules for the good of the group.

We like - and need - to know what is - and what is not – acceptable behavior in our society as humans.

The list of existing laws, rules and requirements that we are to obey in our world is pretty extensive – sometimes, it feels like we have way too many restrictions hanging over our heads.

There are laws governing our country, cities and towns that cover all levels of living - from the Bill of Rights and the Constitution on the national level to how late a band can play outdoors on a Saturday night on the city level.

There are laws and requirements that dictate how we travel by car: speed limits, parking limits, requirements for starting and stopping, and requirements for construction of safe vehicles.

There are laws and requirements for travel by air: bags can only be so large or we have to pay extra, and they can only contain certain items to be eligible to travel with us; we can’t take sharp implements with us, nor bottles of liquid larger than 3 ounces, and we have to have identification with a photo to even be able to board the plane.

There are laws and guidelines that protect us from purchasing spoiled food at the grocery store, and from eating tainted food due to unclean food preparation in eating establishments.

There are laws and requirements that protect us from being served or treated or taught by unprofessional and unqualified lawyers, doctors and educators; and there are laws and requirements that dictate what kind of health care we can receive and who can and cannot live in our country.

And if you're a child, there's another whole level of rules to follow – those set down by your family members and those set down by the teachers and school leaders – in addition to any rules for any game you will play at any time.

All of us are surrounded by laws, rules and requirements - pretty much all the time.

Some of us feel comforted with the limitations and direction given by so many laws and rules – others of us resist being told what to do – so there's always a kind of tension between those who obediently follow and those who barely tolerate the laws and rules of our society.

And sometimes, it feels as though some of us don't follow the rules at all – and they get away with it, too.

Doesn't that just bug you to death?

How often have you snarled at the person in the car on your left who turned without signaling, making you wait to see what he was doing so you could safely go your way?

How often have you growled about paper cups and bags lying all over the ground in a park – when there's a trash can to put them in not ten feet away?

How often have you wanted to snitch on the person who snuck a piece of candy from the Brach's bin or stole a few cherries from the fruit stand in the grocery store?

As humans, we have a strong sense of loyalty to our rules – we tend to respect what they mean to the order of our lives, and we resent it when others don't want to follow them.

And occasionally, maybe we even feel a little jealous about those folk who disregard some of the rules and do what they want, because at times, it just feels like we have no freedom to choose for ourselves. There are just

too many restrictions!

So maybe it's safe to say that sometimes, you just have to bend the rules.

The Apostle Paul knew this, and I'm starting to think he was the expert at finding ways around some of the laws of his day.

He had to do something to bring converts to the New Church, and so he stood firm in his belief that the Gentiles of Galatia other cities were to come to their faith without following Mosaic Law and being circumcised.

Now to us, this doesn't sound like such a big deal, but I've come to find that it indeed was a huge deal to the Jews who already were doing these things, who were also adapting their lives to embrace the New Church, and who were trying to live as good Jews who happened to believe in Christ – all at the same time.

Jews followed the Laws given to Moses, as outlined in the Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible which, by the way, includes some 613 commandments to be followed). They knew Moses had a divine connection to God, and since God brought those laws to him, they were to be honored and followed to the letter – or you weren't living as a good Jew.

Mosaic Law was deeply ingrained in the Jews of Paul's time; Mosaic Law dictated rules for how and what to eat, and how to demonstrate complete dedication to God through circumcision. To commit to these Laws lifted Jews to what they felt was their highest form of wisdom – so they took it very seriously.

But in our reading for today, we hear Paul telling his church in Galatia that no law can bring them to God – he implies that they don't need the Law of Moses to be part of the New Church. Instead, they need to be justified to the faith from belief that Jesus died and was resurrected – they can't earn their way to this faith by following laws, because it's already there for them.

No need to eat specially prepared food, no need to be circumcised. Eat what you want – have a whole body – believe in God through Jesus. Amen.

Paul believed that people should come to God just as they were, just like Abraham did more than 400 years before Moses received the Law. Paul probably reasoned that Abraham was called by God with all of his parts – eating what was available - and Abraham served God well. To Paul, this set

precedence for his own particular theology and actions.

So, to convert Gentiles all over the known world, Paul bent the rules – and disregarded hundreds of years of tradition in the process – never mind that Paul was a “Good Jew” himself and had been circumcised and practiced food rituals.

Paul wanted Gentiles to be brought into the fold with the Jews who already believed, and he wanted them to sit together at meals and worship together at temple...but this went against everything Good Jews believed and trusted about their Laws. So understandably, he ran into resistance.

No wonder he had troubles wherever he went!

No wonder Judaizers were out to get him and discredit his methods!

Here was a guy who was not part of the Original Twelve, who did not get personally endorsed by Jesus, who was a confident, self-proclaimed convert and Apostle – blatantly denying the Law at the heart of Judaism!

Who did he think he was!

If we think about how incredibly brazen Paul was at this time in church history, we can truly appreciate how our faith as we know it today evolved from these roots.

To come past the self-imposed weight of the Mosaic Law required fearless commitment from someone to get the concept across to folk who never even gave a thought to disobeying their basic beliefs. Assuming they respected and needed their laws and rules as much as we do, we can see how Paul’s message of hope and change could really throw things out of whack...would we be open to receiving such a switch in our basic beliefs?

Here’s what Paul wrote...

"For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

The power of Paul's self-proclaimed authority lies in his absolute acceptance of God's work through Jesus in his own life. Remember, Paul was a rigid, law-abiding Pharisee before he found God – and a successful one at that. He proudly made life very difficult for people of the New Church (even to the point of taking an active part in the death of Stephen, an early church leader) until he opened his own heart to receive God through Jesus.

But that was the "old Paul."

Now, as we hear in the Scripture for today, things have changed – Paul has dramatically changed – and there is no better testimony for others as to what the power of God can do than to be exposed to the witness of one who has experienced a conversion of his own – even after living the Law faithfully himself.

Paul recognized the Mosaic Law served a purpose – but he also knew from his own life that it wasn't the bottom line for having faith. Paul was tenacious and dynamic – and a rule-bender and breaker – who believed in the power of God's love through belief of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. And he was committed to sharing his story to illustrate for others the hope of eternal life is there for them as well.

This was the message of his ministry: God wants and loves everyone, period.

This was the message he sent to Galatia – and it has found its way to us, today, thousands of years later.

It's a message of Grace, and it's real.

Thanks be to God for rules that can be broken and the Servant Paul...amen.

Galatians 2:15-21

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law. But if, in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! But if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.