

Love Rules

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Exodus 20: 1-4, 7-9, 12-20 | Philippians 3: 4b-14 | Matthew 21: 33-46

God sounds like a heavy in our scripture passages this morning. Listen again to Exodus: “God spoke all these words” and out comes a string of 10 commandments covering every kind of relationship possible - human to holy, human to nature, human to human, human to community. The commandments cover every emotion from honor to anger, to the coveting of possessions. No wonder after hearing them, the Hebrew people plead with Moses not “to let God speak to us, or we will die.” No warm fuzzy loving God comes to mind with that list.

The picture of God in our gospel passage is no different. Jesus tells a parable of “a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it, and built a watchtower.” When the tenants refuse to give back the harvest to the landowner, violence ensues. Of course, the Hebrew hearers immediately recognize this story because Jesus isn’t the author. It’s the same story and theme of God and vineyards as in the Hebrew Bible. And from this echo of older passages, Jesus’ hearers are just as scared to hear the ending as the hearers in the Exodus passage. It seems like when the landowner’s rule to get the harvest isn’t followed, violence and death are next. Why, it’s enough to make you think of arresting the story teller!

I’m wondering if that isn’t always the result when the rules and roles around a relationship become more powerful than the bonds and love present in the relationship. A subtle and unconscious shift happens in the relationship as when the freed slaves are given the 10 commandments. In their dual brain of either/or, they move rules to the top of the scale. The weight of love sinks in the equation.

Maybe that’s what happens when a relationship let rules become bigger, more important than love and bonds— in any relationship between God and us, between each other, within a community. Because in the Exodus story, rules don’t begin the relationship. Remember where the 10 Commandments come in the Exodus story. Not at the beginning. Not how it started.

Remember how it all began? God comes to Moses in an epiphany in a flaming bush whose flame stays alive. With his bare feet on holy ground and face hidden in fear, Moses hears God speak. Yet, God’s words are not of wrath, but of love. “I have observed the misery of my people_who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their suffering and I have come down to deliver them..... and to bring them up out of that land to a land..... flowing with milk and honey....” Love and compassion, freedom and a future are God's way of starting a relationship and sustaining a relationship. This is the holy ground on which God’s and the Hebrew people’s relationship begins. Love comes first. There is time for rules. Rules have a place to be sure. But, love comes first.

And love keeps coming even when the relationship is being torn apart as in Jesus’ story’s. When the tenants break the bonds of the relationship, the landowner simply doesn’t give up even in the face of violence. The price of love simply increases. After the landowner sends his slaves, he sends his son. Love will not be silence even in the face of violence around the rules. God who hears the oppressed also aches to stop the violence done by those not honoring the bonds and connections.

As Jesus says, love is the stone and more. Love is the cornerstone. Love both creates the relationship and keeps the relationship aligned. That's why Jesus comes to Paul because Jesus knows Paul's relationship with God needs some realignment. You know the story. Jesus catches up with Paul, then known as Saul, on the road to Damascus. Saul is on his way with a letter from the religious authorities giving him permission to find Jesus followers in the Damascus Jewish community. The point is to stone them to death. That's what happened to the disciple Stephen while Saul held the cloaks of the stoners.

With quite a touch of drama, Saul has a vision and hears Jesus ask, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?". Then, Saul falls off his horse and loses his sight. I guess Jesus is serious about getting Saul's life in balance. It becomes clearer when Saul/Paul tells his own version to the church in Philippi. Notice the order of his relationship with God as he lists the rules under which he has lived: "circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." Before Jesus burst into his life, Paul's life was based on rules, perfectly good and recognized rules.

Only Jesus' question nails him: why do you persecute me? Why you do violence in the name of the rules when I have come to create relationships based on love? In a shift from darkness to light, from blindness to seeing, Paul knows in his inner soul that Jesus is the Christ, source of God's love come to realign and balance rules and love.

Love comes first and always tops rules. That's how Jesus lived his life and did his ministry. Jesus let love overturn the rules of revenge, power, being "right", keeping the status quo, continuing the cycle of violence. On the cross, Jesus says with his body and his words, "Let it end with me so you can live a new life based on love."

Paul now sees a heavenly prize and calls others from laws and rules which lead, however unintended, to violence and the weakening of relationship bonds. To use his words, laws and rules are "rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him." To be found in love is Paul's life goal. That is the prize worth attaining above all else. That's the side of the scale relationships are meant to tip toward.

Currently, we are caught in a "Damascus-like" time. Our nation is thrown off our horse by yet another mass murder - this time Las Vegas. Using a gun of military capability, a single man ended the lives of people who loved, were loved, and desired to love longer. Along with a vast web of grief and anger, we are back again as a nation in a divided discussion around the possession, use, availability, laws and rules of guns. Constitutional scholars present their views of the Second Amendment. NRA members and opponents state their case. Phrases like "Guns don't kill people. People kill people" are repeated.

So again, after another tragedy, we are a people focused on rules and laws. I don't have an answer to the laws around guns and I realize it's not my place as a preacher to give one if I did. Yet, I'm wondering if we, as a nation, don't have our focus out of balance. Instead of primarily focusing on "rights", I wonder how the debate and conversation could change if we also focused on the loving actions to take as a nation to decrease the chance of lives ended in a mass shooting. Is there a time when love steps in and balances rules? Is there a chance we, as a nation, have our relationships, our cornerstone, misaligned? Could this last horrific tragedy knock us off our horse and open us to see and live with new eyes, to know the power of resurrection - that love comes first, the rules follow, but love rules. Amen.