

Mark 7: 1-8,14-15,21-23

They say in life two things are for certain... Death and Taxes...seems we can't escape either! One is God's law written in nature and in our DNA... We all live and we all Die...and one is man's law written in volumes of Tax laws...and we do our best to try and "cheat" both ... but that's generally doesn't work out to well does it?

If you are having trouble falling asleep at night, try reading Leviticus and Deuteronomy...or better yet try reading our tax codes...at least you can read the Jewish laws in one sitting...

We Americans are also very much - people of the law...We have International Laws, Tax Laws, Criminal Laws, Civil Laws, there are laws governing our behavior for everything! Our Clubs and churches even have by-laws, even our small Communities and Developments have Laws...as we become "civilized" we use our laws to govern how we behave in ALL instances.

What we heard in the Old Testament reading and in the Psalm today is a call to moral purity...a calling back to basics...God's law and the Jewish communal laws were once one in the same.

Deuteronomy was a Covenant renewal document presented as speeches by Moses in the last months of his life to pass on his knowledge in the form of formalized communal Laws

But what are laws? In the OT the feeling was that kings and even the temple may fail...but not so the ways of God. These early laws were designed to pass on and protect the community and tribes of Israel. They were designed to maintain their community in right relationship with their God and with each other – that was the spirit of the law that God gave to the people of Israel.

In James we start to see a distinction between the laws and traditions of Man vs. the laws and commands of God. Here in this letter to the early Church communities - the focus is on how we behave in relation to God's word vs. the idea of the Laws themselves taking on a life of their own.

We see the laws gaining more complexity where the elect few can USE the laws in maintaining control and power...just like we do today!

In Mark's Gospel we see Jesus addressing this very issue. The Laws were now becoming more important than the behavior they were designed to instill and the communities they were designed to protect...When we read these ancient laws many of us discount them for a people who were ignorant to the way in which a complex MODERN world really works...Not really!

See the Jewish Purity Laws were given by God to the people of Israel in order to protect their community from illness...in fact many of their ancient purity laws look a lot like today's food safety practices...

Pork had Trichinosis, Shell fish...Hepatitis, hand washing and pot cleaning kept infection and bacteria in check etc...Tattoos – blood born diseases...men sleeping with men or animals...These protected against rare illnesses...these laws solicited a behavior designed to protect the physical health of the community by protecting them from disease and illness.

Today we know better about these bacteria and viruses and so we shouldn't apply them in ignorance...for example we shouldn't condemn gay marriage while at the same time eating a ham sandwich! Back then they were equally bad. Today we now know better and have a better way of protecting our folks from things they were unaware of in their day. You follow!?

Today's laws were fashioned in much the same way, for example our Criminal Laws were designed to protect the community as well as the rights of the accused.

I happened to have worked for the Fed Government.....Acquisition Contract law was designed to facilitate and protect taxpayers and Government Servants from unscrupulous business practices and to ensure everyone had a fair chance at getting government dollars and business.

But what happens when the laws get out of hand? And the spirit of the law gets lost in the laws themselves?

Today's Federal Acquisition Laws entails volumes of risk adverse laws designed to protect us from ourselves...The index alone is 146 pages long...146 pages long...just the index! These laws govern how we buy a pencil or a missile and oh by the way there are a number of supplements in addition to this. I don't see how anyone can keep all this stuff straight...

But this causes very real problems for us: We still have soldiers in harms way with people's lives on the line everyday! It can take us over a year in policy review and in legal to make any award...and while this process is happening... a small business owner who makes protective clothing for our military may lay off his entire workforce in Kentucky while awaiting a critical order for the military...and on the other side... soldiers are not getting the "stuff" they need. But we have to follow the LAWS & Regulations.

How many times do we hear about a rapist or a murderer or a powerful politician or business man getting off the hook on a technicality. Many times, a lawyer's best defense is to keep the facts from the jury under certain laws that prohibit the use of evidence if obtained without proper cause.

If you have ever been on a jury (as I have many times) you may see firsthand that the LAW may become more important than justice and the people the laws were designed to serve and protect!

Some things NEVER EVER change:

Jesus faced these same challenges at every turn by the lawyers of his day - namely the Sadducees and the Pharisees. He threatened their power and control as Jesus tried to refocus on the keeping power and control with God! The purity laws of their day prevented them from helping a person who was sick or dying, for example a leper... This reminds me about how did we ourselves treated people with Aides just 20 years ago?

Jesus at every juncture met these conflicts with love and compassion and always put people first which many times were at odds with their 630+ Jewish Laws He grew up with. Jesus would always cut through the bureaucratic red tape of His day.

HE WANTED TO GET BACK TO BASICS... WHY were these Laws created in the first place? Again... The laws were designed to maintain the community (that's people) in right relationship with God and each other. This begets righteousness or Shalom!

Now back then CORBAN is a Hebrew term used to describe anything dedicated to God... It was a trump card that the religious leaders would use to get around say the Ten Commandments. They would offer up as CORBAN things they didn't want to go to the community... only themselves! Therefore, they retained possession of it under their laws! This is how the early lawyers manipulated the loopholes for their own personal gains.

We are masters of such tactics today as much as we proclaim justice... CORBAN now takes the form of Tax Loopholes, Congressional Earmarks, Corporate Bribes, Kick Backs...

In many Countries throughout the world Laws are actually used to suppress justice as much as it is used to uphold it...Laws can certainly be created and used to exert Power and control!

You can easily see this in a Parent's rules for their children – Are the family rules designed to maintain right relationship and peace in the family or do they exert power and control (for me in raising my children it was probably a little of both)!

So what happens when our Laws become so tedious That they now obfuscate or hide the reason the law was created for in the first place. THIS IS WHAT WE CALL THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW...Jesus many times would show the lawyers of His day what the spirit of the Jewish law was firstly designed by God to be...and He should know!

In the Gospel, Jesus speaks not of unclean hands and rituals but of unclean hearts and rules. He calls us ALL out, and calls us to follow the spirit of the law which Jesus later relates to us as the two great commandments...because those two Great Commandments ARE the Spirit of the Law... that which is behind ALL the laws and the prophets messages...In other words Love is the glue that holds ALL of God's laws together...Love is the spirit of God's law...and as Bishop Curry was fond of saying...If its' not about Love then its' not about God! Amen to that!

To Love God with your whole heart, and mind and soul (that is to Love God with your very being)... and also to love your neighbor as you would yourself...BTW Every world religion also has these two tenants within them as well! I wonder if its' that hard to figure out what the Divine Source of ALL being had in mind for us humans! Jesus calls us to follow these commands, not for our sake, but in order to establish Right Relationship with God and our Earthly Community. That's why these laws were created...to unite us...not to divide us!

We in the Church are also subject to these challenges... that is to say: we make rules and traditions that pass on our stories to the next generation... but many time we also loose sight of why something was created by us in first place... our own religious and church traditions can easily take center stage as we forget God and the People they serve...Its what's in our hearts that matters (the spirit of the law) vs. what's on our lips (the words and laws themselves).

We usually call this the 11<sup>th</sup> commandment...cause that's the way we've always have done it before!

Laws have manifested themselves throughout the history of man with the earliest laws showing up around 3000BC with the Ancient Egyptians. Laws are necessary to govern our behaviors and provide guidelines of how we should behave in society for the good of everyone collectively. The laws act to mediate disputes and are intended to keep us civil...whereupon our freedom and the freedom of others can coexist.

Laws ARE Very Very IMPORTANT!

But we can see what happens when the LAWS outlive their purpose, when only a few understand them, and when they are used for personal gain over the rights of the very people in the community they were designed to serve and protect.

Jesus distills every LAW into just two...So when all else fails use this default Law and you'll always be right on target...right in Spirit...Love the Lord your God with all of your being AND love your neighbors as yourself.

If you are ever confused by Man's Laws, by our religious Laws and traditions... or simply confused by ALL the rhetoric (we hear a lot of it these days)...or by someone quoting the Bible to make their particular point... ALWAYS, ALWAYS, ALWAYS apply the litmus test of the two great commandments and see how it holds up...

Do they maintain us in right relationship with God and each other...Or are they actually being used to maintain power and control?

Uniting us vs Dividing us? For the good of all or just for me and my own? Be mindful of how we use our Laws and Rules!

Are we applying them in a spirit of love that keeps US in right relationship with God and each other, or do we apply the rules under a spirit of SELF righteousness and SELF interest...causing discord, divisiveness and disunity throughout the Body of Christ!

The Laws are the Laws...They Are what they Are...lots of words on a page...Jesus showed us - and it applies even more so TODAY...that where our heart is in ALL this makes ALL the Difference in the world...and in heaven!

Dear Lord we Pray that we may always follow your Laws as well as apply them always in your SPIRIT and in Your Truth for the good of all Your creation!

Your faithful servant,  
carmen