

God in Your Hip Pocket

Exodus 20:1-20 & Matthew 21:33-46
October 8, 2017

INTRODUCTION

Happy Thanksgiving Sunday!

I have dual citizenship. For years, I struggled with who I was – an American or a Canadian. I was born in Canada but my parents were American and wanted me to live in the States for a while before deciding – which I did.

Eventually, I came across Pierre Berton's book, *Why We Act Like Canadians: A Personal Exploration of our National Character*. I remember one story in particular – it took place during the Gold Rush in the Yukon and Alaska. Thousands of people were coming into the region to find their fortune in gold but the only ones who really found it were those who provided services to others. Food was a prized commodity and some businessmen hoarded it in warehouses until the price was high enough.

On the Alaskan side, a mob formed, stormed the warehouses, and took the food. On the Yukon side, a mob formed and went to the Northwest Mounted Police who led them to the warehouse and ordered the food be distributed.

That one story showed me I was Canadian. My attitude towards government and laws is essentially a Canadian one.

Which brings us to **today's readings**.

WHEN LAWS ARE A BLESSING

Our Old Testament reading is probably familiar to most us: the 10 Commandments.

God gave the people laws – the 10 commandments – to live by. They were a blessing given to help people. Remember, ancient Jews had lived in Egypt for a few centuries. Somewhere in that time, they had been reduced to slavery. They were told **what to do, when to do it, how to do it and what not to do**.

Then Moses came along with the miracles (or plagues), and the Jews were set free!

- They were free to leave Egypt with whatever they could bring with them.
- They were free to make a home for themselves wherever they could.
- **They were free to live however they could without someone bossing them around.**

But we know what happens when there are no laws – chaos. They were living in a make-shift community, but still a community. Sometimes neighbours aren't always your best friends. Sometimes they're noisy. Sometimes things go missing from your place only to show up in their yard. Sometimes your pet wanders into their yard destroying their garden.

That's where laws come in. They provide a way for us to deal with disputes and injury without always resorting to violence.

- If people know that stealing is a crime, they might ask or tell you if they're going to borrow something from you.
- Laws require that people get vaccinated or are isolated if they contract contagious diseases.
- Laws tell us how fast we can go on the roads, which side of the road we should drive on, and who goes first when cars hit an intersection from different directions.

We might not always like them – and we may break them from time to time ... especially on Highway 401 – **but laws are a blessing.**

According to Judaism, the Torah or the first five books of Moses, contain 613 commandments in all. These laws govern every aspect of life – if people follow them, then they will likely live in peace with each other. When problems arise, laws provide a mechanism to resolve differences.

Those 613 laws are summed up in the 10 commandments. The 10 commandments can be summed up in 2 commandments:

- **Love God with all your heart, mind and soul**
- **Love your neighbour as yourself.**

As an aside – a 3rd summary commandment not stated as such in the Bible though it could perhaps be inferred – **Love yourself as God intended.**

WHEN LAWS BECOME A MEANS TO CONTROL

Laws may be a blessing but they have the potential to be a problem as well.

- **Not all laws are just.** Sometimes they favour one group over another. That's why people protest what they consider to be unjust laws, trying to convince us to agree with them so the laws can be changed.
- **Laws can also be used as a way to control people and stifle freedom.** Dictators tend to use laws to keep people under their control. If you break their laws, then it's easy to say you are a traitor and should be arrested and killed.

But there is another problem with laws – even just laws. Something that is insidious – especially for good people like you and me. ... the desire to set ourselves up, above others, and show that we are better or holier than they.

For example, while many of us might speed on the 401, most of us are more reluctant to speed in town and few of us likely speed in school zones. We obey the speed limit law in school zones because we want our children to be safe. If you're like me, you probably try to go a little under 40 km just to make sure you don't break a law you really do agree with.

Nothing wrong with that attitude ... so far.

But, somewhere along the line we might slip. We might start thinking we're better than other drivers who sometimes forget and go 41 km instead 40. We might start thinking that we'll go even slower – say 35 km – just to show how "righteous" we are – how "law-abiding" we in comparison.

What happened? **We're no longer focusing on children's safety but on us – on our "goodness" and lawfulness – on our being better than others around us.**

That's what happened to many of the Pharisees in Jesus' day.

The Pharisees wanted to be sure they kept the Sabbath holy. But without watches to tell them the time, how were they to be sure just when the Sabbath started or ended? So they added a few extra minutes at the beginning and end of Sabbath ... just to be sure they got the "right" 24-hour period.

When Jews travelled to other countries, they crossed different time zones – which, by the way, hadn't been created yet. So they added extra time to Jewish holidays ... just to make sure they were celebrating the "right" holy days.

The commandment says don't work on the Sabbath, but what is "work"? How do we define whether this activity is work or not – permitted or not. Some Jews went so far as to say that you shouldn't even get out of bed on the Sabbath ... just to make sure you didn't do any work.

Others debated whether it's ever permitted to break the Sabbath and, if so, under what conditions. That led to a whole other debate reserved for a different sermon.

The problem was the laws as given in the Bible are sometimes ambiguous and open to interpretation. Much of the training that Rabbis got and still get is learning to argue fine points of law. How does the law work in this situation – how does it work in that?

The purpose was to weed out the flexibility in the law so they would know what the law **really meant and how it should be applied in any given situation.**

The intent, I think, was a good one. It reflected a desire to take one's faith and one's commitment to God very seriously. **But it also became a matter of control.** For some, they now had a way to prove how much better and holier they were than the ordinary people.

WHEN LAWS BECOME A MEANS TO CONTROL GOD

It also meant they had a way to control God.

Which brings us to our Gospel lesson.

In today's parable, we have the story of a landowner (God) who has rented out a vineyard to tenants (Jews or Jewish religious leaders). He sends them servants to collect what's due him. The tenants kill them. The landowner sends them his son – surely they will respect his son. But no, the tenants kill the son as well.

What will the landowner do? The answer is obvious to everyone hearing the parable – he will throw out the tenants and hand the vineyard over to someone else.

It's obvious the story foreshadows Jesus' death on the cross. God sent his Son and the Jews rejected him and killed him. It's obvious also that the story serves to justify the Gospel being preached to non-Jews.

We believe that Matthew was written some time after the destruction of Jerusalem during the Jewish rebellion. This story explains why God allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed by the Romans and weaves the whole conflict into the Gospel.

But there is also a warning. A warning for us today. A warning for anyone who turns God's laws into something they're not.

The laws are given as a blessing to help people live together in community in harmony.

But in our effort to better understand what the laws mean and what God wants from us in giving us the laws, we somehow distort them. We freeze them – make them apply to situations they weren't intended for.

And if God dares to do something that contravenes our interpretation of God's law, then we run the risk of condemning God.

The issue was not bad Jews – good non-Jews. The Pharisees were not necessarily evil. From what we can tell, Pharisees had a very clear idea of right and wrong and how God would or would not act in any given situation.

The problem was they were so sure they were right that they could not accept – could not even see that God might be leading them in a different direction. And **so they killed whoever challenged their notion of right and wrong – their notion of God.**

The challenge for us ... how often do we do exactly the same thing? How often do we decide how God should act in a given situation – whom God should accept into heaven and whom God should condemn and send to hell?

CONCLUSION

Years ago, a rabbi began his sermon with the following joke:

A doctor, an engineer, and a politician were arguing about whose profession had been around the longest.

The doctor said, "When God put Adam to sleep to remove a rib and make Eve – that was surgery, which means that doctors were around from the very beginning."

The engineer countered by saying, "The Bible begins with the words, 'In the beginning, God created heaven and earth, and the earth was without form...'" Creation was essentially God giving form to what existed – bringing order out of chaos. That's what engineers do."

The politician said simply, "Guess who put the chaos there in the first place."

...

People laughed, and the rabbi went on to say, "Some people can't laugh at such a joke. They place the Bible so high that they actually worship the Bible rather than God."

It's a warning to us. The Bible is God's word and we are to take it seriously. It is our authority and our means for discerning God's will. But the Bible is not God. We are called to follow God ... **not put him in our hip pocket and pull him out to do our bidding** from time to time.

Let us make sure that we take our faith seriously enough to recognize God's blessings in the law he has given us.

Let us make sure that we take God seriously enough to recognize that God is free to do whatever God wants, even if that means when we think God is going against his own laws.

AMEN.