

End Game
“Let the tables come down.”
Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22
Third in the Lenten series, “Open Hearts”

Rev. John H. Hice
March 15, 2009
First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

As Long as You Live in My House

Here it is. It's the sermon that's all about the rules and the Christian's duty to obey them. You might have been wondering when I was going to get to this. And the minute I say the word *rule* or *law* it's likely that some of you will tense up and wonder which ones I'm going to say you have to obey, *or else*. After all, nobody likes to be told what to do, right?

I know that I've done my share of testing the limits and seeing if those who assumed authority over me actually meant what they said. Not recently, mind you; but isn't rule testing in the job description of most adolescents? And isn't rule enforcement in the job description of mothers and fathers, teachers, coaches, police officers and a slew of others who seem to have authority? The exchange at home sometimes goes like this: “Dad, I'm going out tonight; and I'm taking the car.”

“Where are you going and what time do you expect to be home?”

“I don't know.”

“If you can tell me someplace I can approve and be back by 11:30, you can go.”

“What? That's stupid! I'm not going to get home by 11:30!”

“Yes you will.”

“I'm just going, and you can't stop me.”

Now, you know what comes next. Dad says, “*As long as you live in my house, you're going to abide by my rules.*” In chess, the point at which there are only a few pieces left on the board and one of the players is about to win is called “Endgame.” When Dad says “As long as you live in my house, it sounds like endgame, and you know that no matter what you say, Dad wins.

And though there's something that sounds autocratic about that statement, there's something profoundly true. As long as you live in this house, as long as you live in this family, then you'll act like it. You'll contribute to the needs of the family by doing your chores, you'll treat others with polite respect, you'll work hard to give school your best shot, and you'll dress like you respect yourself and others who have to look at you. And the rules go on for other members of the family, too. For those who have a job on which the rest of the family depends, you'll go to work on time and do your best in it, you'll respect other family members, you'll be faithful to your husband or wife, and you'll watch your temper so you don't hurt a spouse or child or parent in rage.

Rules. As long as they aren't useless bothers just intended to exert the power of the stronger over the weaker, they might not be so oppressive at all. They make clear the needs we have for each other to live predictably, in covenant with each other. Rather than stupid, they are all about giving health and character to the family, and they are all about keeping us connected.

Isn't it true when we break the rules: that's when we mess up our relationships?
Broken laws: isn't that what drives us apart?

Why and Why Not

It doesn't start out that way. You aren't apt to say, "I want there to be a breakdown in communication, I want to hurt someone just for the fun of it." Most people don't get up in the morning and say, "I feel like breaking a law today. I think I'll sin." Most sin is usually born out of a sense of injury or poverty: when you feel as though you have been hurt or didn't get something that belonged to you. You justify doing something that crosses the line; and that's when you get into trouble.

There's a story in Genesis in the Bible about the first two brothers, Cain and Abel. Cain became a farmer while his younger brother tended sheep. The story goes that Cain and Abel presented an offering to the Lord out of the yield of their efforts; Abel's offering was accepted and Cain's was not. At first glance it appears that God preferred a roast leg of lamb to splot of rutabaga on the plate, but that's probably not what happened. It was rather a case in which the next year was good for grazing and lousy for growing beets. The ancients would have interpreted that as God granting and withholding blessing on the basis of whether an offering was accepted or not.

Whatever happened, Cain was in a bad mood. It wasn't that he hated his brother at first. Yet, something dawned on him: twisted and insidious and hard to shake. "Abel

was favored. I was not. It's not fair. I want his blessing." While he moped he complained to God; and then God answered with something you and I should take to heart. God says in effect: "When life goes your way, you're all health and smiles. But when the market turns sour and life doesn't follow the script you've written for yourself: your countenance falls (in other words, you frown). Then *beware, for sin is crouching at your door.*" The image is of a lion or a tiger lying in wait, ready to pounce and devour you as soon as you step outside.

It's the attitude makes you vulnerable. Once you say you have the right to cross the line to get even to take what's yours, you whistle the lion to the door. The tale ends in violence and sadness: Cain doesn't get it. He kills Abel, whose blood cries from the earth, and Cain is banished forever to live a life of restlessness. He never has a home.

Separated: he's forever without his brother and even without God because rules are keeping you connected and Cain acted as someone who didn't live in the house. He behaved as one who didn't belong to the family. Endgame: Cain loses.

So, when Moses climbed the mountain and was given the Torah, the 10 Commandments, it wasn't meant to be an imposition. It wasn't intended to make a group of people have to stay indoors when everyone else got to play. It was to give them a character fitting for the family of God.

"Don't have other Gods before God. Don't make idols out of statues or money or your golf clubs so you worship them instead of God. Don't toss God's name around like God is cheap. Set aside a day to rest and remember who you are and who you belong to. Don't murder or steal or commit adultery. Don't lie about someone. Take care of the folks. And don't get consumed wanting what belongs to others." It really sounds like *All I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*.¹

Far from keeping you from having fun, they are the basic ways to stay connected to God and connected to each other. It's all about the relationship.

HOWEVER, you need to keep a balance. You can't get so caught up in the rules that you forget what they are for. I believe that's the point behind Jesus' tirade in the Temple. People forgot. He went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, this grand festival of thanksgiving for God's incredible grace and the love that redeemed them. Jesus entered the Temple, the very center of worship, its walls decorated with gold and gems, where sites and sounds of sacrifice and teaching and prayer filled the senses. But he also saw through the hymns and preaching and saw the tables where money of

common exchange stamped with the profane image of the Caesar were traded for holy coinage, more suitable for an offering. He saw livestock and pigeons, ready to be sold for convenient worship to people who had come a distance and needed to make a purchase for sacrifice. All this was, in a way, necessary.² It upheld the Law. Yet, what he saw was the outcome of a system that had distracted the people of the household from the heart of God. Unwittingly, they had bought into a wholesale commercialization of faithfulness, marketing the Faith for profit. They made God's house of prayer into a marketplace. They had forgotten who they were.

So Jesus drove out the animals. He turned over the tables. He cleansed the house.

Because it's not about the rules for the rules' sake. It's about the relationship that holds people together, makes the family the family, keeps us connected to God.

Jesus is for clearing out whatever gets in the way. And as likely he is to turn over the sin that separates you from God and others, he's going to turn over the tables of sanctioned traditions and practices that get in the way.

As Long as You Live in God's House

Remember the Disney movie, *The Lion King*? Simba, Crown Prince of the jungle, drove himself away from home after condemning himself for his father's death. For years he lived in the mud with a warthog, unable to face his family, his Kingdom or himself. But remember how he was shaken loose from this stifling guilt by a vision of his father calling to him from a pool of water. Mufasa said to him, "You have forgotten who you are and so have forgotten me. Look inside yourself, Simba. You are more than what you have become. You must take your place in the circle of life."

So, may you remember: remember to live by the covenant rules, fitting for those who belong to the household of God. May you let Jesus turn over your tables and free you from distractions that easily make you less than you were made to be.

References

- [1] Robert Fulghum, *All I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. New York, New York: Random House. © 1986.
- [2] Gail R. O'Day, The Gospel of John. The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, vol. IX. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1995. p 543.