

Sermon: Keep Running This Play ‘til We Get It Right

Year A, Epiphany 6

[Leviticus 19:1-2, 9-18](#); [Matthew 5:17-20](#)

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Jesus is at the beginning his ministry of healing and teaching about the Kingdom of God. He’s called his disciples, *follow me and I will make you fishers of men*. (Matthew 4:19) He’s laid out what the Kingdom of God looks like on this earth, blessed are the poor in spirit and those who mourn, and the meek, and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and the merciful, and the peacemakers. (Matthew 5:1-11) In the Beatitudes, Jesus lays out a world that looks very different from the commodity driven world we see around us. Jesus describes what his disciples are like, when they play the long game of faith and of history, they are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). So, now, just at this point in the Sermon on the Mount, there’s a question that’s hanging in the air, that Jesus answers without it being asked. “Good team. Great goal. What’s the play?”

I was at my gym on Tuesday night. My gym guy is a great one for conditioning so I said that he had to be pleased that the Atlanta coach had said that their team ran out of conditioning before they ran out of game. My gym guy shook his head. “Cath, no one, no team, no conditioning coach, no one, can take 93 snaps in an NFL game. It’s too physically demanding.” So I thought about that for a while. And I went back to him. “But if the Atlanta defense took 93 snaps, then the Patriots offense took 93 snaps.” “Yeah,” he said, “but it’s completely different when you know the play. You don’t know how the play is going to come out, but you know what’s coming. It’s not nearly as exhausting, because you can pace yourself.”

So that’s what Jesus is doing here. He’s telling his team the play. As radical a departure from the every day world as the Kingdom of God is, how they’re going to get there is ancient. *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”* (Matthew 5:17) And what is that Law? Its heart beats in Leviticus, at the heart of the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses that the Israelites held most sacred.¹

Leviticus is the ancient priestly code. When scholars read through it, they see no sign of influences that came about after the exile to Babylon.² So this is some of the earliest material, written down 500 years before Christ’s birth, but coming from a much older oral tradition. When you are having trouble falling asleep some night, you might want to look into Leviticus, because it’s a manual for the priests, about how they are to conduct their rituals. And it’s tedious. But if you read it carefully, especially the section that today’s reading is taken from, you see the moral basis that underlies almost every ritual act.³ As you read today, you recognized the Ten Commandments, but this time they had more ethical and moral reasoning to support them. This is where they are summed up with the phrase which appears again and again in the Christian scriptures, *you shall love your neighbor as yourself* (Leviticus 19:18).

¹ Sheldon W. Sorge, “Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Theological Perspective, Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 362.

² Jacob Milgrom, “The Book of Leviticus” in *Interpreter’s Concise Commentary: The Pentateuch: A Commentary on Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, edited by Charles M. Laymon, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1983), 186.

³ Milgrom, 185.

This is the play that Jesus is calling. Jesus is telling his disciples that they are going to do what God told Moses the Israelites were going to do after God had led them out of slavery in Egypt. Jesus reassures his followers that we're going to keep running this play until we get it right, *For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.* (Matthew 5:18)

So what's in there? Leave something for someone else. Don't steal or lie. Don't take God's name in vain. Don't rip someone off. Be kind to those less able than you. Be just. Don't slander anyone. Don't get rich off of someone else's misery. Keep hate from your heart. Help someone realize when they're headed in a bad direction. Don't take vengeance or bear a grudge.

It's doable. It's not superhuman stuff in any event. Sure, it's work. "Do these jeans make my butt look big?" Saying "Well, your butt *is* big. The jeans have nothing to do with it." may save you from lying, but you're getting pretty close to slander and profiting from someone else's misery. So it's work, but it's within our capacity to say, "Darling you'd look gorgeous in a burlap bag, but I don't think those jeans are doing you justice." There we go. No lie, no slander. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Can we do better? Of course we can. Don't steal. I would estimate that 90% of the ball point pens I use have come from one office or another that I've worked in. I don't think I've bought a ball point pen in my life. Don't slander. Don't profit off of someone else's misery. In today's political climate, someone on one side of the aisle or another says something wrong and they are hounded and mocked for being human. If someone called me on every stupid thing I said, I probably stop talking. But gain a level of national prominence and you'd better be super-human, you'd better be perfect. It's not good for us as individuals and it's not good for us as a community.

Can we do better? Sure, we can deal with the little things like buying our own pens or not sharing a YouTube clip with everyone who agrees with us. But we need to look at how the Law works as a whole. The first instruction we read today said *When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest.* (Leviticus 19:9) The idea is that when you harvest, you leave something for the people who have nothing, so that they might eat. And we get that. But when the Law follows up with *You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien* (Leviticus 19:10), we may think that it's repeating the previous verse. But that's not the case. If you have a vineyard, you are wealthy,⁴ in fact you are super wealthy. So the obligation to share with the poor and the alien goes double for you.

And then the Law says one more thing, in the understated way it has of bringing you up short just when you think you've understood the play. *When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien. You shall not steal; you shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another.* (Leviticus 19:9-11). The Law says, God gives the harvest and it's not all yours. If you're wealthy that goes double for you. Some portion of it belongs to the poor and the alien, so don't steal it, don't cheat them out of their share, and don't lie about whose it is.

⁴ Jin Hee Han, "Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, Exegetical Perspective, Leviticus 19:1-2,9-18" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010], 365.

It's hard work. We know what we did to grow that harvest and it sure feels like the abundance that came forth under our watch should be ours. But it's hard work that's doable. The Law says to care for the poor and the alien. The Law says not render an unjust judgment (Leviticus 19:15). The Law says to reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself (Leviticus 19:17). So let's say we look at the Executive Order that bars refugees from entering this country. It is so easy to head off into our corners, maybe sticking one portion of the Law under our arms as we do so. I'm taking the care for the alien. She's taking the reprove your neighbor. He's holding tight to the no unjust judgment rules. But the Law calls us to do all of those and more. So is there no solution?

If we had to implement the Executive Order, just based on who is in this room, without any of the talking heads we see on TV, I bet we'd come up with a solution that said something like, "Let's talk to a bunch of the people who already vet the refugees and find out what else they need or could imagine. And get them whatever it is. But let's also ask them about what they think would make it easier for the ones who don't need to be reprovved or turned away to come and be a part of this country and this community. Because we're the richest nation in the world and we're called to share our vineyard." It won't be easy to do both, but it's doable, so long as we work together and talk with each other. So I think we need to start saying, "If that's what you want to work on, then start doing the hard work. We have to work with people we don't always agree with. And work is hard. But we do it." We have to take the Law as a whole, and *not let one letter, not one stroke of a letter, pass from the law until all is accomplished.* (Matthew 5:18) That's the play we're called to run.

It is hard work. God didn't give us the Law as some kind of really difficult way of obtaining salvation. God's grace has already saved us. The Law is salvation's way of life.⁵ The Law is how salvation shows up in this world. Sure, the Law benefits all humanity,⁶ Christian, Muslim, Jew, atheist, agnostic, whatever. But it is this people's special call from God to embody the Law, more than any other people, we are called to live our lives as a public witness to the beauty and blessing of God.⁷ God has claimed us for a special blessing, and the Law leads us to that blessing, and the Law leads us to the Kingdom where God lives.

So let's keep running this play 'til we get it right.

⁵ Sorge, 366.

⁶ Sorge, 366.

⁷ Sorge, 366.