

Speeding Tickets

Last weekend the subject of speeding tickets came up in conversation. Have you noticed that almost everyone has a story about a special circumstance that allowed them or someone they know to get off with only a warning, to have the consequences of breaking the law ignored?

The reasons for setting aside the demands of the law range from a medical emergency to fears of being stalked to a desperate need for a bathroom to a case of “no harm, no foul” carelessness. I found a website that detailed some of the more unusual speeding excuses.

Some of my favorites were the woman who was speeding to try and get snow off her windshield so she could see better, the man who was in a rush to get to McDonald’s before the breakfast menu ended, and the guy who claimed the reason he was going 54 in a 45 zone was because he was dyslexic. None of them got out of the speeding ticket.

Then there was this first-hand report from a traffic officer: “I once stopped a lady who was crying when I walked up. She said she had just gone shopping for the first time after having a baby, and nothing fit right. I handed her license back and slowly backed away. No good was going to come from that.”

Enforcement of speeding laws is somewhat flexible, depending on the situation. Although officers are sworn to uphold the law, there are times when wisdom says to ignore it.

Today’s Gospel reading tells two stories that provide a similar, fascinating look at the subject of the law and how it is enforced. In the first case, as Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field, his disciples began to pick some of the grain.

They are busted by the religious authorities and asked to explain their actions. On the surface it may seem they don’t have a leg to stand on. The grain was not theirs and this was not an emergency. But it is important to note that the violation of which they are accused is not stealing grain. According to the Torah, plucking grain that belonged to someone else was perfectly legal.

Deuteronomy 23:25 covers this situation: *If you go into your neighbor’s standing grain, you may pluck the ears with your hand, but you shall not put a sickle to your neighbor’s standing grain.”*

The alleged violation had to do with the Sabbath, the day of the week on which God has commanded the people to rest. According to the Pharisees' definition, harvesting grain or preparing food is work. Hence a violation of God's law.

Jesus comes to the disciples' defense by citing a legal precedent from the time of King David for setting aside that law. He then says, "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath."

We often take that to mean the Jesus was proposing a revolutionary storming of the palace—overthrowing the established rules. But in fact, he was citing a well-known teaching of his time.

It was widely argued that the commandment to honor the Sabbath was not a rigid requirement to make people bend before the LORD. Rather its role was to promote life. Deuteronomy says that Sabbath was instituted with the Exodus in mind.

Remember that you were slaves before God delivered you. Remember what it was like to labor hard in captivity under inhumane conditions? My people are not going to be like the Egyptians. You will set aside one day a week on which everyone, slaves included, animals included, all of creation, can rest from their labors. Keep this as a holy day, to remember the Lord and what God has done for you.

The question is, are the Pharisees really going to interpret the law so strictly that picking some grain and putting it in your mouth is a violation of a law protecting oppressed workers on the Sabbath? If they do, it is obvious they do not understand what the Sabbath is.

Perhaps recognizing they are on shaky ground, the Morality Police back off for the time being. But they have not given up because, very simply, they do not like Jesus. They arrange a stake-out the Temple to see if they can catch Jesus in a more blatant violation of the Sabbath.

There just happens to be a man at the Temple with a withered hand. Or maybe he's part of an entrapment scheme; I wouldn't put it past them.

Jesus sees the man with the withered hand and tells him to come closer. He knows exactly what the Pharisees are up to. Before he does anything with the man, he turns to them and asks, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?"

Again he is referring to a well-known rabbinical teaching of the time, "Saving life overrules the Sabbath."

One might argue that fixing a withered hand is not a life-and-death situation so it could wait for the next day. But Jesus knows what it means to have a withered hand in that society. There is virtually no way for the man to earn any kind of a living with that disability.

Without the ability to work, the man and his entire family are doomed to poverty and an early death. In effect, by healing the man he could make life possible for him and those who depend upon him. What is the point of making him wait just to satisfy a rigid demand that Jesus cannot heal on this day because that would be a violation of God's will?

The Pharisees know the answer but refuse to give it. They are so consumed by their hatred of Jesus, their bitter zeal to set themselves above others and make every one answer to their authority, that they ignore the facts.

They ignore the fact that the reason for the Sabbath commandment was to promote life, and that therefore, if Jesus does something to promote life on the Sabbath, he is doing what the Sabbath commandment tells him to do.

Their willful blindness and lack of basic humanity both infuriates and saddens Jesus. You do not honor God by making people suffer needlessly. He healed the man's hand, and the Pharisees, having gathered their evidence, leave and plot how to use this incident against him.

The point of these stories is not to trivialize the importance of the Sabbath. The commandment to observe the Sabbath serves a noble, life-giving purpose. I could give an entire sermon on the many reasons to honor it. In fact, I have.

Nor do these stories turn the 10 Commandments into The Ten Suggestions. It is important that these laws be obeyed.

Jesus himself recognized the importance of the law. In Matthew's gospel, he said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

But what does fulfilling the law mean? Does it mean slavish obedience to every rule and regulation no matter how useless or unfair?

Many people seem to think that Christianity is about exactly that. That its purpose is to tell you what you are supposed to do and what you're not supposed to do, and provides punishments and rewards depending on how well you follow them.

But the Gospel tells us that the commandments do not exist because God is a haughty king who demands people obey his every whim. They do not exist because God is a crabby old neighbor who likes everything a certain way, and gets mad when it doesn't happen. They do not exist as a test to see who should be rewarded with eternal life and who should be eternally punished.

Rather, fulfilling the law and the prophets means making justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream. And yes, God is serious about that. God expects that, and if we are not working for justice, if we are not treating others the way we would want to be treated, then we are working against God, and that is a very serious violation.

The law, in all its many forms and statutes, exists to preserve and protect. It provides an organized framework for determining actions that are acceptable and those that are not. It helps to keep the peace so that we can live in safety and harmony. The whole point of the law is to help us live better, happier, more satisfying and productive lives.

Human laws, however, are not perfect. Human interpretation of God's law is not perfect. There are times, in fact, when obeying the law may cause a great deal of harm. That is the premise of any protest, or demonstration, or civil disobedience.

There is, of course, always a danger whenever we take the law into our own hands, or declare that we follow a higher law than the rest of our community. That has the potential to create disorder and chaos, or to set ourselves up as above the law. For many reasons, engaging in civil disobedience is not to be undertaken lightly.

The guiding light in such situations must always be the Great Commandment—the one commandment that must always be observed, at all times and in all places. Jesus made it clear that fulfilling the law and the prophets is a simple matter of obeying that one great commandment: it means loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind,

and strength, and your neighbor as yourself. If you are doing these things, then you are fulfilling the law.

In these two episodes dealing with the Sabbath, Jesus reminds us that because of the love and grace of God, laws exist not for God's benefit but for ours. He says people were not made to serve laws; laws are made to serve people. When the law does not do this, when the law does not preserve and protect the rights of all, then God's great commandment is not being fulfilled.

The temptation to compare ourselves favorably to others is difficult to resist. For many people, the law facilitates this temptation. It provides a possible measuring stick for who is more holy than others. The more people we can catch failing to live up to the legal measuring stick, the better we look in comparison. That's why judging others feels so good.

But Christianity teaches that we do not become God's people because of what we do, or because of how great we are. God's purpose is not to set up tests in order to reward those with the most faith or the most good works. *We become God's people because of what God has done for us.*

God comes to us in love, to make life better for us. Jesus died on the cross to make life better for us. In gratitude for what Jesus did, we try hard to live in a way that God desires. If we apply the Great Commandment, we should be able to figure out how we are to live; we shouldn't really need a lot of rules and commandments.

Laws against speeding exist for a reason—to protect lives and property and to maintain order. But what if you are driving along a deserted country road, and you come across a person who is severely injured? Medical care is urgently needed. You have only minutes to get that person to an emergency room.

Do you put that person in your car and follow the law put in place to maintain order and help us get along in a sinful world? Do you drive the posted speed limit even if by so doing reduces that person's chances that this person will live? Or do you recognize that in this situation the more loving, life-giving choice would be breaking the law?

There is a winter sign in Chicago that perfectly summed up Jesus' attitude toward the law. *Shovel your sidewalk. It will help your neighbors who need to use it. AND, it's the law.*

There are a lot of law and order folks who would have the sign say, “Shovel your sidewalk; it’s the law.” In other words, “Shovel your sidewalk because we say so.”

But the law does not exist simply because someone says so. It exists to serve the community. The real reason for keeping my sidewalk clear of snow is that it will help my neighbor who needs to use it.

It’s something that should be done even if it were not the law. But the sign acknowledges the sinful human nature of humans. And so it includes that second part: for those of you who have trouble doing things for the right reason; the second part applies. It’s the law.

Jesus said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” When we have trouble remembering to do this, that’s when we need a fair and equitable system of justice. When we remember to do this, we are doing all that God requires us to do.