

There are those who imagine that religion is all about rules. Do this, don't do that – it's how we decide who is faithful and who is not; who's with us and who's against us. Judaism has a long history of rules, and the 'religious children' of Judaism, which include Christianity and Islam, have rule-keeping embedded in them. It seems harmless enough. We imagine a better world – we look for guidance to make it a reality – and before you know it, God has 'given us a list...'

I'm not trying to be disrespectful. I'm deeply embedded myself in a religious tradition that puts great effort into listening for / discerning the 'voice of God', and recognizing the movement of God's Spirit, both within me and around me. The manner of God's speaking (to me) is not exactly thunder on the mountaintop, or commandments carved in stone, but I am trying to live according to my ordination vows. In them, I accept the responsibility of living and working as one who believes that God, who spoke Creation into existence, continues to speak – to me and through me.

I have promised to uphold a long list of documents that the church, in her wisdom, has called foundational and important. Scriptures and Creeds; confessions of faith (and their corrective companion documents) – these are among the 'rules' that guide our spiritual foundation and education, and shape the communities we serve. Ministers of word and sacrament are bound to observe the rules, but we are also charged with helping our communities 'make sense' of the rules. But it's never as simple as "just follow the rules".

Rules describe ideal circumstances, and ask us to consider the most basic alternatives. The rules imagine us at our best. But when we insist on obedience before understanding; when we resign ourselves to the letter of the law - in those moments, we reveal the worst of ourselves.

If you imagine that your way of life is threatened; when you are in the minority; when you conclude that the rules are what generates divine protection (that God's favour is connected to our obedience to the rules) - where the notion of grace is absent, or connected to 'the rules', then the rule-keepers rise to the top - observance becomes more important than justice, or mercy, or love. People of faith seem susceptible to moments like these, and it is into such a time as this – a time of rule-keeping – Jesus came.

He was born to Jewish rules. He was faithful to those rules, so far as we know, at least until the Spirit hustled him into the wilderness for a time of preparation and reflection. That's when the fun started.

Jesus' 'ministry team' was full of under qualified enthusiasts. Fishermen, followers, civil servants and zealots – not yet rule-breakers, but the potential for lawlessness was strong in them. Their teacher talks like a religious person, but there's an edge to his words; a familiarity with God that is unsettling; a story-telling style that gets too close to subjects that 'respectable people' wouldn't touch with a barge pole.

And that's another thing – Jesus is forever talking to the 'wrong people' (according to a variety of different opinions...) Forgetting for a moment that the religious authorities considered His students (and himself) the wrong kind of people, even the disciples were appalled to see Jesus hobnobbing with women, lepers, foreigners, adulterers – surely nothing good can come of that...and besides, 'it's against the rules.'

It is hard to know what to do about these rules - these 'words from God'. The Book records these as Divine decrees: "Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you..." Oh, and by the way, thou shall not murder, covet, lie, cheat steal... “

Thus says the LORD", says Moses, through his many interpreters. Rules are important, and as rules go, these make good sense when you've been wandering in the wilderness, or have been centuries without an identity or a real purpose. As guiding principles for the birth of a new worldview, these 'words on stone' are the best of the best. They helped form the bedrock of civil law (where such a thing is know)

So why should they present such a problem? The phrase "written in stone" - implying something that ought not be questioned, presuming considerable authority as its source - owes its existence to this old testament episode. And along comes Jesus (who ought to know better) blithely picking grain on the Sabbath - healing and doing good on a day, and in a place, that is reserved for...well, what, exactly?

Jesus' frustration with his accusers brings that problem to speech: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath - to save life or to kill?" He has already delivered the 'moral of the story': the Sabbath is meant to serve us, not the other way around. Rules that sprung from the commandments (with good intentions) make a mockery of the intent

of the law (as Jesus sees it). Honour God, says the law. Honour God by doing exactly as we tell you - and on the Sabbath, nothing - said subsequent lawmakers and law keepers.

What Jesus demonstrates - in a time and place where the law defined people - is that God's character shapes divine law. The commandments help us know what God values - how God sees the world; a longing for right relationships, a sense of the sacred, 'a time to work and a time to rest'. God's self is revealed to us in these words that we might remember the work of the one who, in the process of 'doing it all' managed to save a day for rest; a day for reflection, worship, goodness and grace.

Food to the hungry is grace. Wholeness offered to the broken is grace. Rest for the weary - even one day out of seven - is grace.

But this is not just about keeping the Sabbath holy. For Jesus (in this morning's gospel) that's where it starts, but behind his Sabbath rebellion lies a more important theme.

Instead of using the rules to shame people who are wounded, misfortunate or miserable, Jesus reveals the spirit of the law; food for the hungry - drink for the thirsty - the 'disabled' are made able, the wounded So the law becomes, in Jesus, a gift rather than a curse. Rather than a 'law-keeper', Jesus was the embodiment of what the law tries to describe - Jesus reveals God's view of the world, God's compassion and love. Jesus is the embodiment of God's grace.

He tries to make it easy for us. "The first commandment is this: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength. The second is this - Love your neighbour as yourself." (Mark 12: 29-31) The whole enterprise hinges on the 'rule of love', and on the day that the 144th General Assembly of the PCC opens we would do well to remember that.

God does not judge us according to how well we keep the rules. No, God's standard for us Is much higher. We are being judged by our capacity to love. Jesus love - the love that led him to the cross - shows us the way. A path of love that is the world's salvation.