

This week, the Miami Heat won a crucial playoff game against the Milwaukee Bucks on a controversial call at the buzzer. This call happened a mere three seconds after another controversial call, both of which revolved around the issue of incidental contact. Heat player Jimmy Butler was clearly fouled on a desperate jump shot as time expired in a tie game. The foul had absolutely zero bearing on the trajectory of the shot, but rules are rules, and Butler was awarded a pair of free throws, which he calmly sank to secure the win. No overtime. Heat win. Bucks lose. Bob goes to bed at a reasonable hour.

I bet that somewhere, on that same night, a driver was given a speeding ticket for going 37 in a 35, or that a jaywalker got a little too confident near an overly-assertive crossing guard, and now he's got a citation to pay. And as Monday drifted into Tuesday, and August became September, there were no doubt millions of monthly payments assigned extra fees, because the postmark was one day late.

All of these enforcements are by the book, and you can't blame the referee, or the official, or the clerk for doing his or her job, but these enforcements seem to lack a sense of humanity and grace. To be fair, the consequences in the prior scenarios are relatively harmless for people like you and me. Sure, sports fandom breeds insanity, and high blood pressure at times, but life does eventually go on, even when the refs make boneheaded or righteous calls. And yes, it's annoying to pay late fees and fines, but they rarely have long-lasting effects.

But the Joe Friday approach to justice (just the facts, and just following the rules, ma'am), has more far-reaching effects as the stakes get higher, or when enforcement is applied to marginalized communities. In many instances, enforcement results in consequences that far outweigh the offense: deportation back to the violence you fled peacefully; eviction, after you worked so hard to find the rent money; longer prison sentences for crimes and substances associated with marginalized communities; disqualification of voting rights because your maiden name is still on your ID; ostracization from community because of outdated norms; the list goes on. And of course, this is to say nothing of enforcement officials who too often decide that they should also be prosecutor, judge, and jury.

I'm not here this morning to write my account of Les Miserable, or to help Sardis storm the Bastille, or to unearth more inadequacies and imperfections in our judicial system. Maybe I can do that next week! My point in making reference to rigid enforcement of rules is more of a way to segue into this morning's psalm.

I think often times, we hear a psalm like this, one whose author longs to be obedient to God's law, and we bristle at the potential outcome. Rather than see the graceful God of creation, or the nurturing God of Exodus manna, we see the judgmental, wrathful God of the more violent pieces of Hebrew scripture. God's gonna scare us into obedience rather than love us into discipleship. And in such a context, we wield God's law as a weapon of retribution rather than channel it as a path to better understanding our neighbors, and cultivating reconciliation.

Jesus loved God's law. Jesus also fulfilled God's law – that is, he found a way to apply the law with heart, mind, strength, and soul. He implemented the idea of hedging. The commandments were a floor, not a ceiling. So he devised practices that didn't seek to ignite conflict, and he worked to resolve conflict before it festered into violence. If you look for the humanity in someone, it's a lot harder to resent them, a lot harder to associate their value and their worth on the basis of what they own. If you know someone's heart, it's much harder to resent them for superficial reasons.

I think it's also worth noting that Jesus didn't have overwhelming confidence in the grace of systems. I'm not saying he denied their legitimacy, I'm simply saying he knew their shortcomings. In today's Matthean lection, Jesus warns his followers to settle disputes in private, to let there be grace and humanity in the decision-making. Often times, litigation or prosecution can have grave consequences. Yes, we want justice to be blind and equal, but we also need to find more remedies that prevent us from getting to such a place. Individuals can forgive and atone in a way that the courts cannot – there is a freedom and flexibility there. And Jesus reminds his listeners that if they are able to resolve their conflicts peacefully, they'll gain something greater than retribution: friendship. (Matthew 18:18).

With this in mind, I am particularly interested in one line of our psalm:

Turn my eyes from looking at vanities;
Give me life in your ways. (Psalm 119:37)

I wonder, how often are our eyes fixated on vanities, empty prides and conceits? How often do we make God's law something to be recited or enforced? How often do we make God's law something that we have a hold on, rather than God's law being something that has a hold on us?

When we choose to wield God's law as a weapon, Nineveh's destruction is just reward for enduring three days in the belly of a big fish; and our thirst for vengeance clouds our judgment so much, we aren't able to offer God gratitude for the breath in our own lungs, or for the shade of serendipitous palm leaves, or for the mercy and hope of preserving life. When we choose to wield God's law as a weapon, to cloak ourselves in self-proclaimed righteousness, to demand fair payment for our loyalty and service...when we do this, we eliminate our ability to celebrate the embrace of a parent reconciling with a child; we eliminate our ability to see that domination systems traumatize their foot soldiers, too, rob them of their humanity. When we wield God's law, the sorrow of laying down our harps can manifest to violence, not just to our enemies, but to their babies as well. When we wield God's law, we rob God's law of its life-giving sustenance.

But this psalmist, and I think you and me as well, longs for understanding; longs to delight in life-giving, heart-moving, empathetic, servant practices; longs to find God in the traditions and customs first set out at Sinai.

Here's what I think; no, here's what I know: The Lord is slow to anger, and abounds in steadfast love, from generation to generation. (Psalm 145:8). Torah, or the commandments, or the law, or just trying to be church, or whatever we want to call it, is our attempt to model the grace and love of God. There are plenty of clauses and ordinances you can explore in further depth in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, but Jesus gave us a central thesis: Love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love neighbor as self. (Luke 10:27).

I think in this age, and in every age, we put too much faith in our systems to apply God's ordinances, and too little in ourselves. I ask you: do courts, corporations, tax codes, school systems, state houses, and the countless mechanisms of human-

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a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

making, do these things have souls, hearts, or minds? Their artificial intelligence is unquestioned, but can they feel, can they sense, do they live, and breath, and share the same dependence on God's abundance as you and me? And how often, whether intentionally or not, do such structures wield the law, rather than live into it?

I believe we will never fully understand God's law, abide in God's law, find love in God's law, until we stop using it as a litmus test for righteousness, or a winnowing fork for community, and start using it as an invitation to model God's mercy, love, and justice.

Friends, may the living of God's law begin this morning, in each of our hearts, in order that we might bear out God's vision of peace, love, and grace for all we encounter. And may it begin right now. Amen.