

The Rules of Religion

Luke 13:10-17

Over the past several months, a small task force consisting of rather boring, vapid, and anal-retentive people has been busily rewriting our church's bylaws. Chip Anderson, Tim Bates, Chris Butta, Wendy and I are the people in question and, as you can see by the calendar, we're meeting again this Tuesday (anyone want to come? It's a real party atmosphere!). Actually, it has been anything but dull; none of the aforementioned task force members (with the exception of yours truly) fit this description of boring banality; it's just you would expect them to given the task at hand. Somehow, we've managed to make rewriting bylaws quite colorful and entertaining...even if we've done it at your expense (just kidding!).

Bylaws by nature are an insomniac's cure. Most people find them egregiously tedious, bone dry, and painfully laborious to get through, with organizational processes and prescribed roles parsed out in dense legal language. They are what every organization needs and also what they routinely ignore. They are what people stuff into the proverbial drawer until they get pulled out when a person wants to do things right or, more likely, when it's believed someone is doing things wrong. Bylaws are the book of rules we go by; they are intended to be precise and thorough for a very good reason. As Benjamin Franklin himself once explained, "It is easier to *prevent* bad habits than break them!"

What has made our present task interesting is that we have pretty much rewritten everything that was previously on the books. Not only have we updated and streamlined the processes and roles,

reflecting our governance change to a single managing Council, we have also written it in accessible language with much of it tied to our church covenant. We hope that by the time they are presented to you at the next quarterly meeting in October, you will be able to digest them with ease and cast an informed vote on them come January. After that, you can stuff them into a drawer and forget about them!

One of the things I have appreciated through all of this is how free we are in our tradition to write the rules as we wish. There is no standard boiler plate, “one-size-fits-all” template sent to us from denominational headquarters that serves as the set of rules and regulations for governing churches. That may have been true a generation or two ago, when every church had a set number of Deacons, Trustees, Sunday school Superintendents, treasurers, boards and committees and, depending upon the tradition, Elders, Presbyters, and representatives to all the various denominational structures and organizations that ever existed. Churches everywhere had elaborate organizational charts, with endless boards, committees, and subcommittees to ensure that every conceivable job was covered, every religious activity was represented, and that every possible person who associated with the church would find an elected or assigned duty to keep them everpresent at board meetings and worship. It was like managing the City of God.

Times have changed, of course, and so most churches have downsized operations (including us), at times with the help of bylaws, sometimes not. Instead of the democratic ideal with every church member serving on a board or committee, we’re organized now more like an oligarchy, with only the willing and the vested managing the

operations. That's been by necessity more than by choice, as fewer people have time to volunteer to keep things going. At present, that seems to work fairly well, enough to formally inscribe it into our bylaws.

However, updating bylaws doesn't address the larger issue about being a religious community in the 21st century and, especially, what some view as the archaic practices or customs that define or limit us far too much as people of faith. What I mean is, some of the religious "rules" that exist may have been suitable for an earlier time, but have lost their meaning and usefulness in our current context. So every generation has to ask: What traditions, practices, or customs around here have we inherited and followed that are relevant to our times, and which ones aren't? What have we maintained simply because keeping them is perceived (rightly or wrongly) to be an act of faithfulness? What practices or concerns have little to do with our actual faith, but a lot to do with our sense of being religious?

These questions are even more pertinent today because the younger generation is losing interest in perpetuating the faith as we embody it. The generational renewal of the church is not happening across the board as it has in the past. So what needs to change? The rules of religion that I'm referring to have more to do with how we express and exhibit our religious life than with the faith to which we give witness. It has to do with all the sacred cows related to worship, music, liturgy, rites and ordinances, atmosphere, community activities, furniture and apparel, and so on—the things we associate with our religion, but actually have less to do with our faith than we often believe.

Let me present it in this way. If we organized this church all over again, if we began with a blank sheet of paper upon which we would draft our religious life based solely upon the Gospel teachings of Jesus, what would our community of faith look like? What gives best expression to our faith in Jesus and what he stood for? What would be its name; when and for what purpose would we gather; what would we do to give expression to our religious faith? Would we have sermons? Or a choir? Would we sit in pews? What would we sing, if at all? Would we have Sunday School, or is there another way to learn and wrestle with the teachings of Jesus? Would we serve The Lord's Supper in our standard way of sharing it? Would we choose to meet in a room like this, and would it be at this time, or for this purpose?

Who knows, we would differ, I'm sure, in our opinions. And if you truly want to get heady about it, how would you reorganize the entirety of Christianity if it was in your power to do so? How would you make it authentically a religion reflecting the essential Jesus, assuming you even knew how you could define that?

The point I'm making is this: what are the rules of religion that we expect people to obey, to follow, or at least respect that are ultimately not as important as they seem to be? Could there be something akin to "religion-less Christianity"—a term attributed to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, meaning genuine faith without the trappings of what it means to be "church?" If we were to create a radical return to the bare essentials of Christianity, what would we come up with?

Mind you, this would not be an easy task—it's more complicated to figure things out than it might appear; plus, along the way, you

would incur some hostility once you slaughtered somebody's sacred cows. Though you may think you love me now, if I had the gall to form a new task force to completely reinvent Noank Baptist along these lines, I'm pretty sure Wendy and I would be losing our nice view from the deck! But this illustrates my point: the rules of religion are rules for a reason! They are there because, over time, in some way, they have been established as carrying meaning and significance—even if it's beyond our legitimate spiritual interests—and they will often be more sacred to us than even the essential teachings of our faith!

The rules of religion come into play as well in our lectionary text for the day. Here, Jesus was defying one of the most important of them all, i.e., honoring the Sabbath. Frankly, of all the rules of religion, this one certainly is a sacred cow, as well as being biblically and spiritually legitimate! It was a foundational part of the Ten Commandments! How and why would Jesus mess with something so essential to Jewish culture, identity, and faith? How was that not disrespecting God, let alone the tradition?

Now most of us are old enough to remember when blue laws protected Sunday as the Sabbath for the Christian majority in this country. No commercial activity was to impinge upon this day to allow everyone the opportunity to worship and to rest from daily work. This tradition was inherited from Judaism, where the weekly Sabbath begins at sundown Friday and ends 24 hours later. The vast majority of Christian traditions, however, made Sunday morning the beginning of the Sabbath, since that was the time of Jesus' resurrection.

In any case, as the story goes, while teaching in a local synagogue, Jesus encountered a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years. Without missing a beat, he called her over and healed her. Immediately, she was made well and took great delight in that, as you can imagine.

But then the President of the synagogue grew indignant that Jesus would deliberately insult the sacredness of the Sabbath, when all work was to be avoided out of respect for God. It reflected badly on the synagogue and its leaders, who could be accused of not taking the rules of religion seriously. By the standards of their day, synagogue leaders would feel more than justified in saying this: why create controversy, and why dishonor God, why disgrace the sacredness of their traditions by disregarding the exclusivity of the Sabbath with work that was supposed to be done any other day of the week? There were six other days. Is it too much to ask? Was nothing sacred to “thirty-somethings” like Jesus?

Honestly, I can appreciate the irritation on both sides. On the one hand, it’s obvious Jesus responded to a human need; why shouldn’t he—the woman was crippled, what time better than the present to address it? On the other hand, the religious leaders could counter and say, “Look, this has been going on for 18 years! What’s one more day to wait until the Sabbath passed, so that you don’t cause such an offense to others by disrespecting this hallowed time?”

Which side would you support? Of course, we could translate this into our context and say, “Why can’t there be a day during the week set aside for a Sabbath as it used to be? Why do stores have to be open, why do community sports have to be scheduled, why are

there so many non-religious activities that compete with the few hours of a week for people of faith to have a Sabbath?”

That might even lead to the larger question of what’s the point of religion if nothing—absolutely nothing—is sacred? Isn’t it preferable to maintain some exclusivity about certain things like the Sabbath, so that the very traditions that bind us together aren’t lost and forsaken? Otherwise, what’s left for succeeding generations? If no one honors the Sabbath, who will come to worship anymore? Who will respect...or even remember...God?

But if we read between the lines in this story, what the traditionalists failed to appreciate was that it wasn’t maintaining the rules of religion that revealed the greatness of their Jewish heritage or faithfulness. Instead, it was the relevant power of God, who could literally change a person’s fortune and destiny in life. That was precisely Jesus’ point. It wasn’t their fidelity to their sacred traditions and customs that made them vital and relevant as a religion; it was their moral faithfulness and their heart for people like this poor woman with compassion, justice, and mercy that revealed God’s presence in their lives. For as Jesus said, the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath; to which one might add a corollary: the Sabbath wasn’t exclusively set aside for the worship of God, but instead for human beings—to give them rest from their daily work. It was an act of mercy and justice meant to bless those who were enslaved to their work by their own doing or by someone else. God could be honored, thanked, and worshipped anytime—all week long!

When you think about it, doesn't this make sense? Does God have no presence and relevance beyond a designated time for worship? Of course not! The Sabbath was, and still is, an opportunity for people to be drawn closer to God and to have access to God's presence and power—to strengthen them, to comfort them, to redeem them, to empower them, to heal them, and to bind them in love and concern for one another. But a Sabbath can occur at anytime; only the rules of religion define it to be a certain day and time of the week for everyone. Again, the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath. If anything, we should be concerned that people find a break from their labor so they are not burdened continuously by the stresses of their life and work—that they are granted time to renew themselves with a Sabbath rest that works for them. We might even consider offering several smaller and less formal times for spiritual renewal throughout the week instead of insisting that “church” only occurs between ten and eleven on Sunday morning!

Our life together, like any church, is a collective expression of meaning, designed to draw us closer to an awareness of God and to our responsibility to live as God would have us do. But none of it is so sacred that it can't be changed or adapted to make it more relevant to our times. As Jesus demonstrated so often, the rules of religion *are meant to be broken*—and we do it for our sake and for God's! That's why we have to think deeply about these things, individually and collectively, in order that our ministry may be readily available to those who need renewal for their spirits.

As much as we cling to what helps us express and understand our faith, as much as these things are sacred to our spiritual life, we also must recognize they may be nothing more than our own sacred cows—something that others won't necessarily agree with, understand, appreciate, embrace, or find meaningful. That's the nature of religious rules—they are rules only if they are meaningful and lead us to what is ultimately true in life.

It's not a matter that nothing is sacred anymore; it's a matter that in God's usage, *everything* can become sacred. Anything can take on new meaning; everything can have value if it reaches another person with the power and presence of God. All that we do in religious practices are merely a means to an end—they're only meant to help us understand Jesus' message and to help each of us make right our relationship with God and with the world.

That's what religion is at most—to make that which seems sacred in its own time, sacred *only* for its own time, so that the power and presence of God can be revealed in new and relevant ways and not denied by the very ones, like us, who seek to honor it most.

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25 August 2013