

We are a people of “new dimensions.” Our forebears in faith were called “Pilgrims,” indicating that we are indeed on a journey, at that time seeking religious freedom. And now the United Church of Christ often says “wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here.” We are not comfortable with indoctrination, with any rigidity in dogma from church leaders as ultimate authorities. As part of the Protestant Reformation, we have no Pope, no Bishops, and often say “Who are the ministers? All the people! Who are the priests? We believe in the “priesthood of all believers.”

It is fairly clear that Jesus was not keen on hierarchies and ultimate authorities in religion. He was constantly challenging the scribes and Pharisees of his day. He challenged his own disciples to not follow the ways of the world, *human* authorities, but to seek guidance from *God* as the ultimate authority. In our gospel lesson this morning we see Jesus breaking the law regarding Sabbath. In doing this he teaches that the Sabbath laws were made for (to help) humankind, not the other way around. The Sabbath laws were not God... Sure, God said to “remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, to *do no work*,” but then humankind, our Jewish forebears, started spelling out every little detail of the definition of “work.”

Apparently picking grain on the Sabbath was considered work, thus outlawed. But Jesus allowed his disciples to pick grain and eat, and when questioned by the religious leaders, he basically says, Rules can be broken if there is a good reason... When King David and his companions were *hungry*, they entered the Holy of Holies and ate what only the priests were supposed to eat.

We can think of many instances where we think it's OK to bend or break rules. For obvious examples we could start with rules of the road...like Red Lights! If your wife is in labor and starting to give birth... if no one is coming the other way... of course *anyone* would keep moving toward the hospital! (Now a Red Light at 2 in the morning, with no traffic... and nature is calling... a bit more questionable!) What about speed limits? Sometimes it is more dangerous to go under the speed limit when the whole world is going at least 10 mph over. On the road, it seems everyone is breaking the law, and the police are giving a certain amount of grace.

What about rules we had during the pandemic? Many health officials admit that some were rather arbitrary, like the SIX feet distancing... and grocery stores followed suit with *one-way isles* (I admit I broke that rule occasionally... I knew just where my favorite refried beans were (only 1/3 of the way down the aisle!), and no one was close by, so I scurried over and got a couple cans, then circled back!) And let's face it, the rules of some companies, and public organizations during the height of the pandemic were oppressive and totalitarian in nature: get vaccinated or you will be fired. What happened to freedom over our own bodies?

What about religious rules? It's a valid question to ask, as did Jesus to his disciples, "Are these human-made rules, or is this from God?" In the Christian church, we have an ongoing question about communion: who is "allowed" to partake in our communion? We've mentioned that in the United Church of Christ has quite a bit of freedom for

wherever we are on our individual journeys. So the communion table is open to all who “sincerely are seeking the presence of Christ in their lives;” Yes, it’s up to each person’s conscience and self-examination.

What about the religious rules of Kosher eating? A professor at Emory University in GA give the example of a Kosher mother who fed her children non-kosher meat. But she was on a train to a concentration camp and there was no other food! By not being a slave to the religious laws, she was saving or at least prolonging the life of her children. I was with Rabbi Alex this past week, doing a dialogue for residents of Brooksby Village. Rabbi Alex said that while there are many good reasons and spiritual benefit from the discipline of eating only Kosher food, many of his parishioners do not keep Kosher; they have their own individual journeys and inner authority, and they do not try to force or guilt one another into keep Kosher. I remember well one summer at a family reunion that my Jewish brother-in-law went out and brought home a bundle of lobsters... and he ate one too! There are all kinds of Jews, all kinds of Catholics, all kinds of Protestant Christians and surely every person has to decide what parts of the religious practices are most meaningful, which spiritual disciplines they wish to do... how we want to observe a holy day, a day of rest... which for many of us, might be just 1/2 day of rest!

What about the laws in the south called Jim Crow laws, keeping blacks and whites separate? Were they human-made laws? Or were they Godly laws? To move more toward God, people *needed to break those laws*, needed to

sit-in at lunch counters, or sit in the front of the bus like Rosa Parks did.

When Jesus was arguing with the religious leaders of his day, we remember that he accused the Pharisees, the teachers of the law, that in trying to observe so many details of their laws, they acted like they were straining out gnats! Jesus said what was more important were the “weightier” matters of Torah Law, like showing love, mercy, and justice.

Jesus was a rabbi in his day that looked for the deeper matters of any law. Rabbis today also debate and discuss the many laws in the Torah, how to interpret them for today’s world. Rabbi Jesus underscored that the heart of the whole faith, that the greatest commandment of law is that of Love: to Love God with whole heart and to Love neighbor. So whether or not we are following the laws of our land or the norms of our faith, our actions must be evaluated by the law of love. Is what we are doing increasing love of God, love for our neighbor? If we follow certain laws and norms of our culture, are we helping the common good? That can be our question, our spiritual discernment... whether to follow a societal rule or norm, or perhaps break it for the sake of saving life, for the sake of a greater good, for the sake of the weightier law of Love. Amen.