

When is it right to follow the rules and when is it right to break the rules? When is it right to strictly interpret the rules and when is it OK to overlook the rules? I ask this question after hearing a man this week tell about an incident that happened to him when he was in high school.

Olly Neal grew up in Arkansas during the 1950s. He didn't care much for high school. One day during his senior year, he cut class — and wandered into the school library. In the library that day he stumbled onto a book written by African-American author Frank Yerby. And the discovery changed the life of a teenage boy who was, in Neal's memory, "a rather troubled high school senior."

The book was *The Treasure of Pleasant Valley* — and it had an alluring cover, especially for a teenage boy. Neal remembers it being "risqué — a drawing of a woman who appeared to be wearing something that was basically see-through. But the symbolism was really great for this African-American boy at that age of 16."

There was just one problem: If Neal took the book to the checkout counter, he was sure that the girls who worked at the counter would tell his friends. "Then my reputation would be down, because I was reading books," Neal said. "And I wanted them to know that all I could do was fight and cuss." Finally, Neal decided that he ought to steal the book, in order to preserve his reputation. So he did.

A week or two later, Neal had finished the book — so he brought it back to the library, careful to replace it in the same spot he had found it. But when he went to put it back, he found that there was another book by Frank Yerby. So Neal thought, 'Maybe I'll read that, too.' So he took it under his jacket.

Later, he brought it back, and there was — by God, there was another book by Frank Yerby. So he took it. He read four of Yerby's books that semester — checking out none of them.

But Neal's sneaky behavior turned out not to have been so sneaky after all. Attending his 13-year high school reunion, Neal ran into the school's librarian, Mildred Grady. She had seen him trying to steal *The Treasure of Pleasant Valley* years ago. Neal said, "She told me that she saw me take that book when I first took it."

"She said, 'My first thought was to go over there and tell him, boy, you don't have to steal a book, you can check them out — they're free.' "Then she realized what Neal's situation was — that he could not let anybody know he was reading."

Grady told Neal she decided that if he was showing an interest in books, "she and Mrs. Saunders would drive to Memphis and find another one for him to read — and they would put it in the exact same place where the one he'd taken was. So, every time Neal decided to take a book home, the pair would set off to the city to find another book for him.

But the women's efforts paid off: Neal went on to attend law school and later became a judge, retiring as an appellate judge of the Arkansas Court of Appeals.

In the passage which we read today, some Pharisees are concerned by the rules. They ask Jesus about the rule concerning divorce. They don't ask him for knowledge or information. It is clear they know what the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy says about divorce. They are trying to challenge his authority. But Jesus doesn't allow himself to get cornered into a debate about the intricacies of the law.

Instead, Jesus takes them back to the story of Creation. Jesus challenges the Pharisees to think about what was God's intent at the beginning of creation. And the intent at the beginning of creation was an equal partnership that would not be broken by human sinfulness.

As I was reading this passage this week I was also looking out at the traffic mess we have in front of the church now. Normally the rules of the road are pretty straight forward. You pull out to the intersection, you look both ways, and if no cars are coming, you pull out and head in the direction you want to go.

But every day the rules out here may change. The construction crew might be working on this side of the road so you get to the intersection and you might be directed to this side of the road or that side. The normal rules don't apply. And sometimes it's a little scary because you don't know what the rules are and this can become dangerous.

Society functions well when everyone has agreed upon the rules. But I think this passage of Scripture challenges us to always ask what the basis for the rules we follow is. Are the rules we've been taught necessarily good rules for us? Do we need to question some of the rules? Does God want us to always follow the rules? How does one know when it's right to challenge the rules?

I don't have a good answer of when it's OK to question rules. Rules that are created by people to keep an orderly society. I do know that when Jesus said to bring the little children to him that this was breaking the rules because children were considered 3rd class citizens. I do know that when Jesus challenged the Pharisees understanding of divorce he was breaking their rules of when someone could divorce.

I wonder if this week we are being called to look at some rules that we have always abided by and ask ourselves, "Is this a good rule?" If we conclude that it is and it sustains us and it sustains others and it sustains God's creation, then we can affirm the rule. But there may just be something that we have been taught that we may prayerfully say, "You know what. That rule is not what God would want me to affirm."

Today is Worldwide Communion Sunday. I love this day on the church calendar. I love knowing that as I take communion today, I am in solidarity with the Catholic in Ireland, the Pentecostal in Latin America, and the Baptist in Mississippi. Through our common faith in Jesus Christ we are one.

We may have different rules about the way we worship or the way we structure churches or who can be in leadership, but we all share one important thing in common and that is our faith in Jesus Christ.

As we share in Holy Communion today, we may want to begin to ask God what are the rules that are important and what are the rules that need to be changed.
AMEN.

-“Boy Lifts Book; Librarian Changes Boy's Life,” NPR Storycorp segment on Oct. 2, 2009 and found at

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=113357239&sc=fb&cc=fp>

-Text: Mark 10: 2-16

-Given: Oct. 4, 2009 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)