

Our second reading today will come from the gospel of John. Like the other three gospels that tell us stories about Jesus' life and ministry, John is not just describing historical events. John is also writing to a specific community addressing specific issues.

The stories of Jesus were told orally for at least 40 years before they began to be written down. Most commentators believe that the gospel of John was written to a Christian community near the end of the First Century that was facing persecution from the Roman Empire.

But in addition to this persecution from the Romans, it is also believed that the community was in a hostile relationship with leaders of the Jewish synagogues. This conflict with Jewish leaders is why we get such strong condemnation against Jews in the gospel of John. Unfortunately, these strong anti-Jewish statements from John have been used by many for bigotry against Jewish people today.

As we read this gospel, we should ask ourselves three questions. What does this reading say about the event as it happened in real time? What does this reading say to the people that the gospel was originally written to? And what does this passage say to us today?

Read John 15:9-17

We may have heard of some different laws around our country which seem strange or unusual. For instance, in Mississippi you can be jailed for using profanity in public. In Minnesota, it is illegal to capture a greased pig. In Massachusetts, at public events you must play the National Anthem in its entirety and you can't make it into a dance song.

In Florida, dwarf tossing is illegal. In Delaware, it is illegal to sell the fur of your dog or cat. In California, a frog that dies in a frog jumping contest cannot be eaten.

In North Carolina, bingo games cannot go longer than 5 hours. And in our beloved South Carolina, a male over 16 years of age cannot seduce a woman by promising to marry her.

I understand why some of these laws came about. I'm kinda glad that dwarf tossing is illegal in Florida. I wince when I hear people cuss in public or play profane music loudly from their car. And I'm kinda glad I live in a state where a man can't seduce a woman with a false promise of marriage.

Our country has had its share of unjust laws that have been overturned. Next year will mark the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment. The 19th Amendment was ratified in 1920 and it gave women the right to vote. The 15th amendment was passed in 1870 which gave people of color the right to vote but it took the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to guarantee this right.

A big event will happen next month when women will be allowed to drive a vehicle in Saudi Arabia for the first time ever. Which, this week I saw a wonderful picture of a Saudi Arabian Muslim woman donning her Harley Davidson T-Shirt as she was taking bike driving lessons.

Many times, laws are passed out of fear or intimidation. Denying certain people the right to vote are examples of laws passed out of fear and intimidation. The Session of Allison Creek Presbyterian Church once passed a law in 1954 that people of color were forbidden from entering this sanctuary. Obviously, that is a law which we no longer abide by here.

Jesus had something to say about laws in the passage we read today. In the 10th verse of our reading he says that if you keep my commandments you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in my Father's love. He then goes on to say, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

So, what do these words from Jesus have to teach us today? I'm going to borrow words from Rev. David Lose and share two observations that he makes about this commandment from Jesus.

Number 1 is that love involves obedience. Obedience may make some of us feel uncomfortable. Obedience conjures up images of giving up a sense of power and control. For some, it may conjure up images of submission to another human being. Many have been abused when they have been told to be obedient to another person, usually a woman towards a man or a slave toward a master.

Others of us have felt abused when we have been told to be obedient to an unjust system like an employer or institution or government entity. The affirmation that love involves obedience leads us to the second point.

The second point from this passage is that obedience is about loving one another. Laws are just only if they affirm and strengthen the ability for us to love one another. Whenever we designate rules upon our kids, is this rule done out of love?

Whenever we negotiate our needs with a spouse or partner, are we asking for what we are asking for out of love for the other? Whenever we set up rules in the church body is it showing love toward the other?

Do we communicate rule changes in a loving and affirming way? When someone communicates a rule change to us are they expressing love or are they exerting power and control? Obedience and rules are about loving one another.

This whole subject of obedience, commandments, and love is a very difficult subject and there are some really thin lines. Our church ancestors who passed rules against people of color entering this sanctuary thought they were doing the Christian and, therefore, loving thing.

Our Christian brothers and sisters who deny rights to women to be ordained as pastors and church leaders think that what they are doing is Christian and loving. Our Christian brothers and sisters who deny welcome into the church to people based on their skin color, nationality, or sexual orientation think that what they are doing is loving.

We will not all agree on what it means to show love and being faithful to the commandments from Jesus. That's true. But that should not keep us from being driven by a desire to show love toward one another.

We need to keep asking these following types of questions when faced with the assigning or accepting of rules. Is this person who is asking me to follow this particular rule doing this out of love or something else? Are they acting out of love or domination?

When we set rules or boundaries, are we being driven by love or are we driven by some other desire which may not be healthy?

As we ponder these questions we continue to commit ourselves to being obedient to Jesus and trusting him to guide our way.

We are invited to hear again the words of Jesus, "I am giving you these commandments so that you may love one another." AMEN.

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-Robinson, Melia, <http://www.businessinsider.com/weird-state-laws-across-america-2018-1>

-Lose, Rev. David, <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1533>

-Given: May 6, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)