

“God is no respecter of persons.” There is a stained glass window at Christ Church in Canaan that has that biblical phrase written on the bottom of it. Sounds odd doesn’t it. That is the King James version of a verse that comes just before our passage today. It is Acts 10:34. In the NRSV it is rendered “God does not show partiality. Ah that makes more sense. Peter is discovering that God loves Romans and Greeks and Jews alike. It appears from this day’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles that God is also not a respecter of laws either. God appears to make rules for us to follow, as in the dietary laws of the Jews, and then ask us to break them.

For hundreds and hundreds of years the Jews had been carefully following the laws that God had given them to govern their health, their spiritual and social life. But Peter, a good Jew, as well as a disciple of Christ, had this vision about a sheet let down from heaven that had all sorts of animals in it. “Kill and eat.” It seems a strange command that God would give him, but the point was that Peter should feel free to eat with Gentiles, to share whatever they ate and to not make a distinction between what Peter would have called clean and unclean foods.

This story is the longest single story in all of the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Why did Luke spend so much time on this one story? Because it was an important turning point for the new Christian church to recognize that God was calling Gentiles as well as Jews, and even Gentiles who were Roman soldiers as was Cornelius. Peter argues his point very thoroughly going through the story “step by step” so that the Christians in Jerusalem can understand most assuredly that this came from God, not from **his** own mind. The way Luke tells it, the Jerusalem Christians were very skeptical before Peter launched into his story. I bet they had told Peter to go slow. Not to push this idea that Gentiles could be Christians without

becoming circumcised Jews first. But after Peter told them about his vision from God, and that of Cornelius they were silenced and they praised God.

The question I have asked myself when reading this passage and thinking about our history as Christ's followers is, why does God seem to sometimes tell us to go against established law? Did God change his mind about what was right and what was wrong? That surely can't be it. Have we changed over time? As scripture is our testimony, I believe we have changed our understanding of what God would have us do. When taken all together we can see this over the long arc of salvation history. But how are we to know what laws to keep and which ones to break? If I don't like the new stop sign on the corner, should I just decide not to obey it? Of course not. We have laws for a reason to keep us safe and healthy.

For example,

How did the bishops who ordained the first 11 women priests in Philadelphia back in 1974, illegally, know that that was what God wanted of them? They were going against the express will of the General Convention of 1973. They had been asked to wait. The church would study the issue further. Wait. Be patient. But the bishops who ordained the first 11 female priests did not wait. They must have felt that God wanted a change to be made then and there. At the next General Convention their irregular ordinations were accepted and a new era in the Episcopal Church began.

There is a very well written article in last week's New Yorker about the struggle that women priests in England are facing now with respect to the possibility of becoming Bishops. It may seem old hat to us now that we have our own female bishop here in CT, but in England this is clearly a major issue. And Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury has been taking a "go slow" approach hoping that the Anglo Catholic conservatives won't bolt for Rome. The Pope as you may remember offered safe harbor for any priest and parish that wishes to escape the Church of England, or the Episcopal Church for that matter.

Let's look at some other law breakers in history. How about Rosa Parks, who broke the law and refused to give up her seat in the front of the bus in 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama. How did she know that God was asking her to show the world that discrimination was immoral?

In the civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s Martin Luther King Jr. had been asked by his fellow clergymen to wait. Be patient he was told. Don't try to force change so quickly - it angers people. His fellow pastors said as much to him in a statement they made. King read that statement as he sat in the Birmingham Jail. He wrote back to them in his famous response:

*"We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights."*

Let's keep going back in time: to England in 1807, the year that Parliament outlawed slavery in Great Britain. William Wilberforce was the man behind this movement who, when first elected to the parliament had nothing like this on his mind at all.

*"Raised in privilege amongst the social elite, educated at Cambridge, William was described as a late night, party loving, upper class unbeliever when he was first elected to parliament at age 21. Through reading the book "The Rise and Progress of Religion in the Soul" he came to a dramatic conversion to Christ. He was appalled by his "shapeless idleness" and tormented over "the most valuable years of life wasted and opportunities lost, which can never be recovered." He resigned from five clubs in one day, he stopped going to questionable shows in*

*theaters, and he gave up gambling. With a new intellectual rigour he set himself to redeem his idle years devoting an average of nine hours a day to study.”<sup>ii</sup>*

What was it that God said to William that changed him, and made him want to change the law of the land, so long established? Slavery appears to be a well accepted fact of Holy Scripture. How did he come to realize that God did not care for this activity of ours of buying and selling human beings?

Let’s keep going back in time. What about Martin Luther. A priest in the Roman Catholic Church, and as such was told that he must sell indulgences to his flock so that they could free the souls of their loved ones who had died and may be burning in hell. (And so Rome could pay for the building of St. Peter’s Basilica). “If you just make this donation to the church,” he was supposed to say to his people, “your father will be absolved of all his sins that he committed in his lifetime.” That was the party line from Rome. Martin Luther realized that this was wrong and that God would never have commanded this sort of thing.

He posted his 95 points of errors by the Catholic Church on the door of his Church in Wittenberg in 1517 and faced a trial for heresy. He was excommunicated, declared an outlaw, but evaded arrest and lived to translate, publish and preach until his death by a stroke at the age of 62. Martin did not wait for Rome and Pope Leo to come around to his way of thinking.

It’s interesting that with all these people and events, we can look back at these with perfect 20/20 hindsight and see that the persons were right to do what they did. There are countless other examples of people throughout history who have turned long held tradition, or indeed even codified laws upside down because they could see clearly what maybe the rest of us might not see so clearly – God’s vision for us.

And who did we Christians learn all this from? From Jesus, of course. Jesus was a radical troublemaker to the Jewish authorities of the time. He was not about to follow the Jewish

Laws that did not make any sense. So, Jesus ate with sinners (people who were unclean), he healed people on the Sabbath when no work was supposed to be done, and he declared God's absolution to those who were penitent. But, at the same time, Jesus has told us that the Jewish Law was to be respected, that it was of God. Jesus would not ever say that there is no use for the law and its truth. But that truth and mercy can and must live together.

So, again I ask the question that keeps coming back to me throughout my prayer and meditation on this subject this week. We can see this all clearly in the rearview mirror, but how can we possibly know what God would have us change about our laws, our rules and our traditions here and now?

The answer is given us in our Gospel reading from John. "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." That will be our test of a situation or a law. Is what we are proposing to do or not do, the loving thing to do? More precisely, does this or that rule, law, custom respect the dignity of every human being. If we change this law or break that rule are we loving our neighbor as we love ourselves? It would be great, of course, if all the things we face in our lives fit nicely into these categories of good and bad, respectful or not. But, there is always much gray area. I won't pretend to know what Jesus would say about the current situations in which we find ourselves; the wars in which we are involved, or our very current immigration reform questions. Change is inevitable. No matter how much we would like to hang on to the familiarity of what we know. I commend all these concerns to your prayers, keeping the teachings of Jesus and the experience of Peter in mind. And always we should not neglect to add to the end of each prayer, "in all things, Lord Christ, thy will, not mine be done."

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<sup>i</sup> From [http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

<sup>ii</sup> From <http://www.reformation.org/articles/William%20Wilberforce%20-%20Campaign%20to%20End%20Slavery.htm>