

Sunday, March 8, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon – “These Are The Rules”

Oh my goodness! The ten commandments and the cleansing of the temple in one week.

Could it be as simple as acknowledging that these are the rules and this is what happens if you break them?

I don't think so. I think there is more.

There is something about rules that puts us on the defensive.

Rules are a paradox because if everyone followed them, we wouldn't need them.

Sometimes they make us feel like we're not trusted.

Sometimes they make us feel like we're not in control.

Writer, Elizabeth Pedersen says “Rules dictate how we are supposed to live and act. Though they are meant for good, they can be seen as a billboard for our shortcomings. They reveal to us that no, we are not perfect, we do not have it all together and we most certainly are not in control. And that makes us squirm a little bit—especially when we know we are bound to fail.”

The ten commandments were given to us as a gift from God. God was providing leadership to his wandering people.

If we could possibly follow these ten commandments we would live peaceful, abundant lives.

Actually, if you just followed the first one, you would naturally come by the others.

But the Israelites, just like us, really need the specificity of all ten.

Pedersen comments, “We, exposed as sinners by the 10 Commandments, are not left to figure it out on our own.

For just as the Commandments show us that we are not in control, they reveal to us who is.

It is ok to acknowledge that we need rules and to seek forgiveness when we find ourselves unable to uphold them.

In today's gospel reading Jesus loses his temper and acts in a way that we don't expect from him.

It seems that he is breaking all of his own rules about forgiveness, not judging and non violence.

The cleansing of the Temple, however, was an act that was expected of the Messiah.

One of the things the Messiah was supposed to do when he came was to restore the true worship of God in Israel, so when Jesus entered the Temple and started overturning the tables, it was as if he was claiming to be the Messiah.

In John's gospel, the cleansing of the temple is followed by the proclamations of both Nicodemus and John the Baptist that Jesus **is** the messiah.

For John, the temple temper tantrum is a defining act that helps people to recognize Jesus' divinity.

More often, however, this story is told as a testament to Jesus' humanity and used to justify our own anger and outrage when we feel our religious sanctity has been violated by some commercial enterprise.

Writer, Nathan Nettleton gives us a completely different perspective:

He writes, "the hard part of this for me to face up to, for us to face up to, is what it is that Jesus attacks.

If he'd come in raging about the ten commandments, we might have coped.

If he'd attacked the thieves for their stealing, the adulterers for their adultery, it would be OK.

Even the pharisees for their legalism, the Saducees for their snobbishness, the soldiers for their violence.

But in the temple that day he didn't mention any of those things.

He attacks worshippers for their worship.

He denounces the religious for their religion.

This is not an attack on the pagans in the casino boardroom, this is an attack on the righteous here in the church."

Nettleton concludes, "Ouch! That table Jesus is turning over is my table. This is not somebody else's problem. This is us."

Nettleton confronts us with the idea that Jesus' message wasn't that people were not worshipping God – it was not intended for the "unchurched" as we call them.

His message was about maintaining the integrity of worship and was directed to the very people who showed up every week to worship – the rule followers.

The temple was the place where people went to worship, to meet with God.

And this tantrum took place at Passover, which was the most important occasion on which everyone sought to make it to the temple to celebrate what God had done for them.

Historians estimate that the population of Jerusalem, in New Testament, times would swell from 50,000 to 180,000 at Passover.

Pilgrims would come from as far away as Persia, Syria, Egypt, Greece and Rome.

The merchants in the temple were part of the system of worship.

They were providing a much needed service for the worshippers.

You couldn't put Roman coins in the temple offering box, it had to be Jerusalem shekels, so when you came in from out of town to worship you needed to deal with the money changers.

As a service to travelling worshippers the money changers set up in the temple forecourt.

If you wanted to offer God an unblemished lamb or pigeon, as the scripture required, you had to buy one, and so the livestock traders set up at the temple *as a service to the worshippers*.

Perhaps they charged a little extra, but it was all about ensuring that people were adequately prepared for worship.

The people gathered that day had come to *their* sanctuary hoping to encounter God, to praise God the only way they knew.

All of those present were following the rules.

How they must have wondered at Jesus' outburst.

In their hearts and minds, they were not doing anything wrong.

Nettleton's interpretation made me stop and wonder about not just our worship practices, but our own personal habits and relationships.

I started thinking about how easily we fall into patterns of behavior that become routine and how seldom we make any attempts to change those patterns.

We become complacent, content.

We are reluctant to change, unless something or someone happens to shake things up.

In our comfort, we may miss an opportunity for transformation.

The religious leaders who came running to challenge Jesus immediately questioned his authority to condemn the worship practices.

They demand 'What sign can you give us for doing this?'

The sign that Jesus gave them must have frustrated them immensely: "Destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it up."

One writer pointed out “if they truly believed in him, they wouldn’t need a sign, so they wouldn’t destroy the Temple to see if Jesus could rebuild it.

But, if they didn’t believe in him, they wouldn’t believe that he could rebuild the temple as he said.

So, there was no way they would damage their own Temple with no assurance Jesus could repair it.

John tells us that Jesus was actually speaking about his own body but even so, Jesus must have been amused at the priests who could not risk taking him up on his offer of a sign.

The truth is Jesus was really trying to show them that believing should have been enough - there should have been no need for a sign – just as there should have been no need for shekles or pigeons to worship God.

Sometimes we fall into the same trap.

We long for God to work in our lives, we know what we should be doing - because the Scriptures make it pretty clear - but we ask for signs and miracles to convince us.

What would it take for you to just risk believing today, and to live in the freedom of Christ’s love?

I was reminded of a story I read in a church newsletter several years ago:

A tightrope walker was performing one of his walks across Niagara Falls, from the Canadian side to the United States side. As he inched his way along, thousands of people screamed his name and cheered him on. When he got to the United States side, people cheered his name. While still on the rope, he raised his hands, shouted his own name and asked the people if they believed in him. The people cried back, “We believe, we believe.”

He raised his hands again and shouted to them, “I am going back across the rope, but this time I’m going to carry someone on my back. Do you believe that I can do it?” Again they shouted, “We believe, we believe!” He then raised his hands again and asked, “Who will go with me?” The crowd was silent. You could have heard a pin drop if it were not for the roar of the falls.

Finally out of the crowd stepped one soul. He climbed on the tightrope walker’s back and for the next three and one-half hours, the tightrope walker and the man inched their way back to the Canadian side of the Falls.

The point of the story is very clear: Thousands shout that they believed but only one truly believed.

Believing is not just saying I believe, it is giving yourself over to the one in whom you say you believe.