

I remember, I think it was in middle school, when my friend Melanie made her bat mitzvah. The Torah portion she had to read for her bat mitzvah was from Leviticus, and it was a series of rules which sounded picky and trivial to me.

Like a lot of Christians, I had grown up absorbing a sort of latent anti-Semitism from hearing a lot of sermons that tried to make Jesus look good by making Judaism look bad. Like most people, I don't remember much of what people preach, but I had still absorbed the idea that the laws of the Old Testament were "bad" and Jesus was good for "replacing them with love." Which is nonsense for multiple reasons.

And one thing that helped me come to a more mature understanding was what Melanie said when she offered comments on her Torah portion. She pointed out that all those rules were evidence of God's love. God gave them because God cares and wants God's people to live well, to treat others well and remember their connection to God. I immediately recognized that she was absolutely right. In an instant, I went from smug and sophomoric to being grateful for wisdom's correction. That's one way you know you've encountered the love of God.

As Christians, our connection to God begins in Holy Baptism. But just what does *that* mean? Yes, we should try to live faithful and virtuous lives in general, and to obey Jesus's teachings to the best of our ability in particular. We're certainly better off living in such a way. But the

sacrament of baptism is inherently all about *God's* unconditional love for *us*. When we are baptized, we are assured the grace of God's love, which washes away all sin and connects us to God in a bond the world can never break.

In particular, baptism connects us to the death and resurrection of Jesus, a sacrifice that was necessary because human sin had damaged the relationship between God and humanity, and God's love for us was so strong that God was determined to forgive sin, overcome death, and enable a new, right relationship between us and God. God's law is good, and it absolutely has a place in that relationship, but the Law is one aspect of the relationship, not the whole thing, not the point. Law is subordinate to love, and therefore not in conflict with love.

Law is one way God brings order to chaos. I'm reminded of yesterday at the "A Full Summer" meal packing event. The organizers didn't give us a lot of instructions on how to pack the bags, they just set plastic bags, boxes of snacks, cards, and stickers on long middle-school-cafeteria tables. But fortunately, Amy Serles swiftly and graciously organized us into an assembly line, and within that framework, we shifted and adapted our roles as we went along. We were better off having a clearly-articulated organizing principle than we would have been if everyone had tried to do the job in a different way. The communication and application of that organizing principle was not about power or coercion; it was a gift, both to the people packing, and, ultimately to the children who would receive food and notes of encouragement. By the same token, the Law of the Old Testament is good, but that law is

neither the first nor the last word in the love story between God and humanity.

Or as Jesus taught, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath.” This isn’t as famous a teaching as “Render unto Caesar that which belongs to Caesar,” but it should be more famous, because our relationship with God is much more important to us than our relationship with Caesar is. And our relationship with God is also much more important to the world than our relationship with Caesar. And this teaching is important because there are so many people who call themselves Christians but take the Pharisees’ punitive, extremist approach, thus showing themselves to care more about power than love.

Disputes about how we practice religion aren’t arcane or irrelevant. It matters whether we make God the center of our lives, and whether we understand God as loving or judgmental. Mark quotes Jesus as saying, “Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?” Which seems overwrought, but then Mark points out that after they witnessed a restoration of life, the Pharisees reacted by plotting to destroy Jesus’s life.

Knowing who God is, and how we relate to God, matters a lot because this knowledge changes how we think, changes what we value, changes how we treat other people and the environment. Wrong ideas about God cause real harm. When we think God is vengeful or cruel, we

implicitly give ourselves permission to be vengeful or cruel. When we think God cares more about rules than about people, not only do things beyond those rules lose importance, but we lose compassion for people who follow different rules.

That being said, refusing to work on the Sabbath *is* a commandment from God, and more. Long before giving the Law, Scripture tells us, God set the precedent of the Sabbath by resting after the six days of the Creation story. That is to emphasize that the Sabbath is not merely a rule, but a grace that's woven into our reality. Sabbath is kind of a big deal, so, when they insist on keeping the Sabbath holy, the Pharisees have a valid point. Jews also believe that any act that *might* save a life takes priority over observing the Sabbath, and such an act is not merely permitted, but required, but having a withered hand is not life-threatening. So in today's Gospel, it would take more than a clever argument for Jesus to win his dispute— so Jesus offers more.

Being God, Jesus is technically exempt from the Law, and he declares himself to be God by declaring himself to be “Lord of the Sabbath.” But Jesus was also a faithful, observant Jew. And Jesus needed the Pharisees and everyone else to see that the dispute was not some abstract, academic question but a very real, concrete, situation— with a human face, a person worthy of not just consideration, but compassion. Jesus needed them to see that while Sabbath obedience had brought them together, and that was good, God's love is bigger than the law and its obligations, and God's love can transform sickness into health, and brokenness into wholeness, in tangible, concrete, life-changing ways.

So he asked a man to stretch out his withered hand, and his hand was restored. That is, St. Mark's use of the passive voice indicates that God the Father did the healing. In case it wasn't already clear that the Pharisees' accusation was a hostile distraction, Jesus didn't even break the Sabbath. Healing in this way shows Jesus's profound humility, and also the unity of his will with his Father's. And shows that as important as the Sabbath is to God, love for humankind is even more important.

This same love likewise restores our hearts, and inspires us to be gracious and generous, to do more than rules might require of us, not merely to obey God, but to imitate God's love for us. And that love has very human faces, first in Jesus himself, second in all those in need, but also God's love by our baptism is in all Christians. Wherever we encounter the love of God, we should be grateful, and eager to magnify that love.