

Pentecost 14, Proper 17B, 090212
All Saints Episcopal Church

For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders;

In the name of the one God. Amen.

Here's a little story from *News of the Weird*: A man bought a box of very expensive cigars. He protected his investment by taking out an insurance policy on the cigars. He insured them against: "decay, spoilage, theft and fire."

In the next few weeks he proceeded to smoke all of the cigars in the box. Then he filed a claim with his insurance company, stating that the cigars were lost in a series of small . . . fires.

Of course, the insurance company rejected the claim, which ended up in civil court.

Even though the man admitted smoking the cigars, he won the case because, . . . "the company declared the cigars insurable property, and did insure them against fire, and the Company failed to specify what sort of fire was excluded, therefore the claim is legitimate."

The man collected \$15,000. As he was leaving the courthouse, the man was arrested and charged with 24 counts of arson. After all, he had confessed to setting "the series of small fires" which had caused his loss of property. He was convicted and sentenced to 24 months in jail and was fined \$24,000.

Ever since God handed Moses the Ten Commandments on top of Mt Sinai, there has been a debate concerning the letter and the spirit of the law. Both our Gospel text and the cigar story point out the danger of following the letter of the law while violating its intent.

In our Gospel lesson it is important for us to remember that Jesus was an observant Jew, a Jew who treasured the Law of God. Jesus took the Pharisees to task for following the letter of the law while ignoring its spirit.

We tend to forget that the Law was given to the children of Israel as a gift, not a burden. In fact, the presumption of the Jewish law is that all people, even slaves,

are human beings whose lives are sacred. And the constant bias is in favor, not of the powerful and their possessions, but of the powerless and their poverty.
(Thomas Cahill)

This was something new, something unheard of in the ancient world, something that had not been seen before in other religions or other codes of law. Jewish Law was a gift to the Jews and to the world; a gift to remind us that our lives are sacred, and so are the lives of everyone else.

But you know what happens with rules, don't you? We start out with a few rules, meant to help us, to protect us, and the older we get, the more rules there are. When we are little, the first rule is: "No!" No, hot! No, don't touch! No, don't run! No, don't put that in your mouth! No, don't go near that sharp corner!

Then our parents get bossier with more rules. They tell us when to get up, when to go to bed, when to do our homework, when to take a bath, when to eat, and when to go to church. As we get older, we decide for ourselves to follow those rules or to change them to suit our way of life now.

To play sports or any kind of games, we have to learn the rules. To drive a car, we have to learn the rules. To do any kind of job, we have to learn the rules.

The rules are not written to make us miserable; they are made for our benefit, so we can have order instead of chaos. Rules are supposed to help us to get along in the world. Rules are supposed to keep us safe, happy, and healthy. Of course, if the powerful become the rule makers and forget about the powerless, making the rules with bias towards themselves, then there is misery for many who become unsafe, unhappy and unhealthy. Sadly, that is a topic for a lifetime of sermons.

As far as religious rules go, God gave us 10 commandments, or rules, to guide us. Jesus told us to love God, to love our neighbors, and to love ourselves. Simple. To the point.

Through the years, however, an extensive code of behavior developed, in addition to the 613 laws written in the Torah, which were very particular and very hard to keep up with. The Pharisees were the most zealous keepers of the Law - particularly the purity laws - so much so that it seemed as if they lived for that task alone. And it is an encounter with the Pharisees in today's Gospel text, that is

a problem for Jesus. They have become legalists, nit-pickers, holier-than-thou hypocrites who would rather be right than redeemed. They have chosen to obey the rules but have forgotten the relationships that lie beneath the rules.

The disciples notice that Jesus himself is lax in his observance of the purity laws. In the short time they have known him, they have watched Jesus lay hands on a leper and a dead child, send a bunch of pigs over a cliff, sit down to supper with a house full of sinners, and violate the Sabbath without a moment's guilt. He does not seem to care about such things. He emphasizes other things instead, such as forgiveness, self-sacrifice, and the power of love.

If we are honest, we will admit that becoming legalists is sometimes true of us as well. We make religious rules that are intended to help us live together as Godly people. Then, over time, we forget that the rules are there to help us, not to hurt us, in our relationships with each other in the community of Christ. And we focus on the rules, on whether others obey all of them or not, and forget about the relationships that lie beneath the rules. And when we don't like some of the rules, we break away; when others don't like our rules, they break away. Our relationships suffer.

But Jesus calls us to understand that it's not about the rules; it's about the relationships; the relationship between God and us; and the relationships between ourselves and others.

If we are only about rules, we find ourselves empty inside. Our relationships with God and others wither up and die. But our hearts are restless until they rest in God, and no amount of rules and regulations and guidelines can change our hearts. Only God can do that.

One night recently there was a documentary on the making of *Sesame Street*. Someone asked the producer about the reaction of the child actors on the show to working with the Muppets, who are, after all, puppets with a human being crouched on the floor holding them up with one arm.

The producer said the kids don't pay any attention to the humans; they just talk to the Muppets. In fact, he said, there was once a child who saw Big Bird take off his top half and an actor step out. The child stared and then yelled to his mother, "Mom, Mom. Do you think Big Bird knows he has a man inside?"

The goal of the law is to remind us that we have a human being inside, in our hearts, in our souls, in our center of being, in that part of us that makes us something other than just a thinking animal. The law also reminds us that other people besides you and me have that hidden humanity, that heart, soul, mind, that center that belongs to God, as well. Our calling is to remember that common center in our dealings with each other. It is our calling to remember that we are called to choose love over rules. It is our calling to remember that not only did Jesus die for those of us in this room; he died for the whole world so that we could all be reconciled to God and to one another. It is our calling to spread this gracious Good News throughout the world, beginning with our own hearts.