

The Best Use of the Law

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For the past couple of years something hard to name has been bothering me. Of course, I feel like something is always bothering me and I need to work on that. It is one thing to do what needs to be done and quite another thing to just be irritated about people and the world most of the time.

We have talked about this before.

Remember Jonah, the prophet with an attitude problem who God sent to preach fire and brimstone against Nineveh only to ask Jonah later, *is it good for you to be angry?*

That is an interesting question coming from God to a preacher sent with a message of citywide destruction. Still, the question is crucial.

We must to be able to make choices about our inner disposition as well as our disposition toward others while we do the work of justice.

I believe the apostle Paul was talking about something like that in this letter to the house churches of Rome. However, Paul is not dealing with anger. He is dealing with an insidious problem difficult to name.

When you read Paul's letters as a collection, you realize quickly that he is always struggling with the law contained in the Torah. Don't forget that the Gospel is not all Jesus and Paul have in common. They were both handed over to die in state custody according to someone's interpretation of law. But the law with which Paul struggled in his letters was the Hebrew law, which is primarily contained in the first five books of the Bible.

Unfortunately, many of us today understand the Torah in stereotypical terms and through the lens of 16th century German theologian Martin Luther, who turned traditional European anti-Jewish rhetoric up several notches when synagogues did not empty out at the first reading of Luther's version of the Gospel.

Nevertheless, the Torah was precious to David the great poet of the psalms, to Jesus and his disciples as well as to Paul. Torah continues to enrich the lives of many

great thinkers who continue to teach the Christian church a thing or two about our God of justice and mercy.

So, as Paul struggled to articulate the meaning of his beloved tradition in light of Jesus life death and resurrection, he discovered that there was not necessarily a problem with the law.

Instead, there was a problem with the use of the law. I promise you I will not get us stuck in the weeds this morning. Even though I am not sure if we can always say the same for Paul. But listen to what Paul says here in verse 21:

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. ²²For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, ²³but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members.

World-renowned *Romans* scholar, Robert Jewett, taught a seminar a few years back to which I was fortunate to be invited. I needed his help to understand that Paul's churches in Rome struggled with solving problems similar to issues in our contemporary life inside and outside of the church.

Paul wanted the Jews living in Rome following the way of Jesus to get along and to collaborate with Roman believers in Jesus whose former religion centered on the Roman state. In chapter 7 of this letter, Paul focuses on one problem among some Jews living throughout the Roman Empire.

According to Robert Jewett the problem Paul had was not with Torah, or the law, itself. The problem was a competitive and judgmental attitude about public performance of the law.

Keep in mind that Paul was writing his letters before the Gospels were composed. More than mere theology, he was concerned about the social life and spiritual health of communities re-organizing life together in the Jesus way for the very first time on the planet.

Ok. But what in the world does this problem with the *old law* have to do with Presbyterians today? We are Christians. We don't observe *Old Testament* laws anymore. We are filled with love and grace instead!

If you say so. Still, when we look closer to home we will discover that our own self-righteous, competitive and vengeful use of access to the law and social justice

rhetoric also draws death closer to some people while driving others away from God's possible community.

Novelist and author Sarah Schulman recently published an important book that I have been running people down in the streets to discuss. The book is called *Conflict is Not Abuse*. In this book, Schulman acknowledges again and again that relatively recent laws against sexual harassment in the work place and laws against various forms of domestic and spousal abuse are long overdue and render visible countless women and girls who have been invisible victims of patriarchal violence.

However, Schulman points out that along with these laws, which are necessary and good, come the power of the State to punish and the power of community to shun. She goes on to say that in far too many cases individuals who have unexamined trauma from previous abuse, call the police during conflict with an intimate partner when it was their mother instead 20 years ago who should have called the police on her husband.

According to Schulman, when access to the law and the state's punitive powers to punish are combined with unfocused vengeance and unexamined trauma, families, communities and entire nations often skip resolution and repair and rush to punishment and abandonment.

I remember becoming possessed by the threat of such a rush during new teacher orientation for my very first high school teaching position at New Caney High School in New Caney, Texas.

I was the first Black person in a non-coaching academic role. Ever. Maybe that is part of the reason why I stored the memory of the principal's frank sexual harassment talk deep in my own flesh.

In addition to the sexual harassment basics, which I will spare you this morning, I remember the administrator's chilly attitude of disassociation.

He told us that if any of us were unfortunate enough to be merely accused of impropriety with a child we should hand in our resignation as quickly as possible. "If you are guilty you should go to jail," he told us. "But if you are innocent we just can't help you—its too much trouble. We don't have the resources and on your salaries, you don't either. Sorry, folks."

The door to my classroom was the kind that closed automatically after it opened unless someone adjusted it manually. Every single day that I taught High School English I made sure that once the bell rang I, or a student propped the door

open. When a student needed to ask me a quick question I had to check the door first. When a student was in tears over a girlfriend or a boyfriend, an incarcerated parent or a dying grandmother I checked the door first. When a student of mine in the throes of a rare unguarded teenager moment went in for a hug I almost always refused while checking to make sure that the door was open. Every student in that building—even when I saw them in the community—were wrapped in a palpable ghostly haze of potential trouble. Each of them reeked of the impending catastrophe.

To this day, I check the door *so to speak* anytime I encounter a woman in close quarters who does not look like my mother, wife or sister. Since that new teachers orientation at New Caney High School, it has been a professional goal of mine not to end up on Fox news. I apologize if any of you have felt the cool or negative aspect of my caution. It is not my favorite effect of the law.

However, legal statutes that protect the rights of woman and girls are not the only occasions for abuse of good and necessary laws and social justice trends.

Call out culture online is another area in our social life in which social morays that purportedly exist to rid the world of harassment, racism, bullying and xenophobia are applied out of context in hurtful one-way communication.

Facebook, is a great way to share an interesting article. It is also a great place to shame and insult people who support the *wrong candidate* or state uninformed opinions. Social media is now the digital stage on which we feel righteous and grand as we pillory and lynch friends, family members and other perceived transgressors who fall short of liberal and so-called progressive politically correct standards.

Racism, xenophobia, hetero-patriarchy are just a few sins that must be identified and eliminated from our public life. But, generally speaking, we will not rid ourselves of any of those things by patting ourselves on the back while shunning our ignorance and the ridiculous peers and family members.

Granted, sometimes we have to put distance between ourselves and others, sometimes permanently.

But more often the real task is to build up the community through discipline, teaching and long suffering love. I am not suggesting that we dilute our commitment to justice. Not even a little. In fact, what I mean to say is that it is easy nowadays to convince others and ourselves that we fight for justice when we might actually be fighting for our phantom selves, our pet wounds, our own privileged ability to label, shun and isolate people with the power of the state, whisper campaigns or online grandstanding.

Liberals dislike the word *evangelism*. A native colleague of mine has also reminded me how much culture has been destroyed in this very region under the evangelism's banner.

Still, there was a time when the church was all about recruitment. The apostle Paul was serious about recruitment. Those of us committed to love and justice according to the Jesus way cannot forget that much of the law with which Paul wrestled still structures our historical pursuit of God's justice even as God's love demonstrated in Jesus guides the way we communicate and demonstrate love and justice in our communities.

We know that fighting racism is the right thing to do. But being self-righteous and condescending about the latest anti-racist terminology while never advocating permanent material reparation is the wrong thing to do.

We know that fighting against heterosexism and homophobia is the right thing to do. Satisfying your own ego shaming people who don't know the right words because their education was less recent or less sophisticated than your own is the wrong thing to do.

We know that ending militarism and refusing to support warmongers are the right things to do. But neglecting and disrespecting servicemen and women caught up in capitalism's war machine is the wrong thing to do.

Instead we have to get serious about being together in a community of people like Paul's ancient Roman house churches.

Each of us is working out what life in God's community could look like when a seeker witnesses the light of Jesus shining through each of us forming that light on a hill Jesus envisioned.

If we get proud of ourselves for being a good feminist or anti-racist freedom fighter or a radical environmentalist and then forget how to recruit and nurture and build then we will have become agents of our own death.

But if we commit to hold each other accountable and take our time with people without being quick to label and shun

God will build in our midst a community of memory—where people remember being selfish, sexist, violent, hateful or callous until a person from God took the time to demonstrate a better form of human life.

I believe that is the best use of the law.