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Finding a Yoke that is Easy and a Burden that is Light

As a child my Father often remarked that I would have made an excellent Catholic. For the sole reason that I was obsessed with knowing the rules and ensuring I followed them. (With the exception of my teen years of course) I, like so many before me and after, wanted to live an honorable and holy life. I wanted to do good and seek justice. I wanted to be Christ-like. But, as I quickly realized in my adolescent angst, I kept missing the mark, I kept messing up, I kept failing to be good. So, I turned to the rules over and over again hoping they would allow me to achieve my end goal. I specifically remember thinking and even saying aloud (well into my 20s and even early 30s) if we could all just follow the rules we could get along and things would be ok, even better than ok, because the world would finally be orderly and set right, by golly! I just want to note, none of this is to toot my own horn, but maybe more so to point out my proclivity for nativity and more so, now that I think about it, my tendency towards fantastical thinking. Either way, as I read Paul's letter to the Romans this morning I am beginning to wonder if he might really get where I am coming from. And, more so, I wonder if he might be able to help me move from a space of naive disillusionment, towards one of practical action. As we hear Paul say: "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want... Wretched man that I am!"

There are many things Paul says in his letters, canonized within our Holy Scripture, that make me want to cringe. Especially in relation to gender roles, marriage, and most specifically women in leadership. That all reinforce (for me at least) Paul's own struggles with, what he dubs as, the evils of "the flesh." But, here in this passage I see the beauty of what Paul is trying to reveal and relay to us today. The fact that sin, which I will define as anything that separates us from God and one another, and which Paul (I believe) defines as that pervasive evil that prevents us from acting on part of the love of God, is a very real part of our daily lives and world. Something that we have tried to control with rules and regulations, law and order. But, which is so pervasive, if we were to truly look around, we would see that it has the power to pervade (as Paul suggests) even our most noble causes and most sincere actions if we are not careful. Because, we would do well to remember, this is all coming from the same man who in his earlier life was convinced by the law to persecute the same body of Christ (the Christian communities) he now is a part of, leading, and writing to. The sin that can pervade our lives and its effect on the law can be seen throughout history from the very first laws and policies, take for example an "eye for an eye", to the wars we have fought on behalf of our beliefs and our God, and even up until today in our own nation's short history with supreme court rulings like Dred Scott or Separate But Equal.

I spent much of my childhood and my young adult life trying to figure out and follow the rules that would allow me to live a "good" life and be a "good" person. But, the more I filled my mind and my life with rules and regulations the more I realized that some of those same rules and regulations prevented me from becoming my authentic self, and living into the call I heard from God. Nothing made this more clear to me, than one evening in my youth group as some of the church's leaders asked us to share where and how we heard God calling us to use our spiritual gifts in the world. Announcing that I believed God was calling me to ordained ministry, a male leader, without missing a beat, turned in his Bible to one of Paul's many verses addressing women's role in the church as being one of submission, as one of a follower, and

specifically as one prohibited from having any authority within the life of the church. As he informed me that my “call” was most certainly misheard, and definitely not allowed (at least not in his church). The fact is as much as we, or at least I, would like to think that it is as simple as our ability to know the rules, for the rules to set us free, life and this world are just not that simple or easy.

And yet, in our passage from Matthew today we hear Jesus say to us, “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart... my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Reminding us of the cure for sin Paul proposed earlier in our passage from Romans, as he stated, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” When we look towards Christ, the Son of God and Son of Man, who lived a life of gentleness and humility, who offered us a yoke that is easy and burden that is light, we can be assured and remember that this is the same person who defeated death and the grave, who ate with sinners and tax collectors, who healed on the Sabbath, who offered water at the well to a Samaritan women, and who kept the party going as he turned water into wine. This is the person who showed us what it means to be Christ like.

So, are the rules worthless, certainly not! It is necessary, right, and good for us to create order, and seek justice, through the law. You better believe as a mother of three children I depend on law and order to keep my household (as much as possible) from being a complete chaos factory. But, are the laws worth it, that is the question? Are they worth the good God calls us to through Christ, as he commanded us to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul, and in turn, to love our neighbor as ourself? Because, as Jesus noted, it is on these that hang all the law and the profits. We would do well to consider how it is that the rules we follow and laws we are under allow us to live into Jesus’ great commandment. Do they offer us a way towards loving the divine with our entire being? Do they honor the beloved life of our neighbor? Do they feel like a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light? We will know it is done for God and good, if it feels like love, which light and lifts us up, as opposed to sin which is always a heavy burden to bear. Much to my chagrin the rules may not set us free, but as Paul reminds us the way of Christ most assuredly can and will. And for that I say, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ Our Lord.