

Unenforceable Obligations

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

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‘Just tell me what I have to do!’ We may find ourselves using that expression whenever we are feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, or just a little lazy. The implication is, ‘what is the bare minimum I can do to get by?’ This approach to life, while understandable, leaves a lot to be desired. Cutting corners and not going above and beyond will not get us very far in life, especially if that is how we treat our faith.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus teaches his followers the importance of respecting the law, but then going beyond the law. We are to respect the law: “amen, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law,” or in the words of the psalmist, “blessed are they who follow the law of the Lord.” But the law is like the bare minimum. The formula Jesus uses multiple times in this Gospel passage is, “you have heard that it was said...but I say to you.” Each time he uses this phrase, he references the law as a starting point, but then heightens the command so that it touches a deeper part of our lives. He invites us to go beyond the bare minimum, to discover the spirit behind the law, and to find a higher standard.

Dr. Martin Luther King called attention to this same dynamic when he talked about ‘enforceable obligations’ and ‘unenforceable obligations.’ Enforceable obligations are the bare minimum. He writes, “[enforceable obligations] are regulated by the codes of society and the vigorous implementation of law-enforcement agencies. Breaking these obligations, spelled out in thousands of pages in law books, has filled numerous prisons. But unenforcible obligations,” he continues, “are beyond the

reach of the laws of society. They concern inner attitudes, genuine person-to-person relations, and expressions of compassion that law books cannot regulate and jails cannot rectify. Such obligations are met by one's commitment to an inner law, written on the heart. Man-made laws assure justice, but a higher law produces love." It is the higher law of love that we should pursue. No one forces us to act in such a way, but as Christians, God invites us to use our creativity to find ways of meeting the higher law of love in all we do.

The example Dr. King was thinking of, of course, was in connection with civil rights. In the same sermon, he notes, "a vigorous enforcement of civil rights laws will bring an end to segregated public facilities that are barriers to a truly desegregated society, but it cannot bring an end to fears, prejudice, pride, and rationality, which are barriers to a truly integrated society." (*Strength to Love*, 28-29) Again, laws- religious or civil, good or bad- are the bare minimum. They are the enforceable obligations. What we should aim for is on the level of the heart, or the unenforceable obligations.

Jesus calls us to respect the law, but also move beyond the bare minimum in our approach to life.

In what ways do I use my creativity to find unenforceable ways of bringing more love into the world?

As we go forth from church this weekend, may we not just keep asking ourselves and others, 'just tell me what I have to do.'" Instead, may we ask ourselves and others, 'what can I do?'