

Gleaning In The Fields Of Light

Love Is The Letter And The Spirit Of The Law

“Again he entered the synagogue, and a man was there who had a withered hand. They watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. And he said to the man who had the withered hand, ‘Come forward ... Stretch out your hand.’”

—The Gospel of Mark

By Ken Woodley

The letter of the law never meant very much to Jesus. He was interested in the spirit behind the letters spelling out the “do’s and don’ts.”

Far too many exponents of the letter of the law carry a set of keys around inside their head. Keys that lock their heart up tightly.

Keys they use to try and lock up the spirit of the law by putting it behind the bars of the letter of the law.

But heartless laws must be questioned, challenged and, if necessary, disobeyed when a situation demands it until such laws are changed or removed entirely.

Jesus believed this moment in the synagogue demanded it and so he honored and obeyed the spirit of the law, rather than obeying the dictates of those who seek to assert human control over God’s love and healing grace.

It was the right thing to do, of course.

There are speed limits set for all of our roads and highways but emergency responders, such as the police, routinely break speed limit laws if the situation demands it.

Jesus was all about speeding God’s healing love to everyone who needed it. He had the pedal to the metal in the synagogue that day.

Civil disobedience has an honored history in our nation, and in other parts of the world.

Slavery used to be the law in the land of the free and the home of the brave. Abolitionists operating the Underground Railroad to help slaves escape to relative freedom in the North would have felt Jesus by their side.

“White’s only” Jim Crow segregation soon followed the end of slavery. Those laws, with their evil letter and diabolical spirit, deserved to be broken. Jesus would have sat at lunch counters with African Americans.

Our nation, itself, was founded on disobedience and finally open rebellion against both the letter and the spirit of unjust laws.

I can’t imagine Jesus tossing crates of tea into Boston Harbor but I can see him giving his life to affirm that all people are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.

God’s love isn’t measured out in teaspoons and tablespoons by dispensary doctors of the law. Jesus demonstrates that truth over and over again.

The Holy Spirit is always urging us to “Come forward” with whatever feels withered in our lives.

If we truly stretch out our souls a healing answer will come. It may not always cure but it will provide healing.

Nor will the answer always be in the exact way, shape or form that we wish. It often arrives in other raiment and will likely be what God knows we desperately need more than what we passionately want.

I have learned that it’s best not to answer our own prayers by putting words into God’s mouth, something I have done too many times in my life. I’ve come to realize that I can, in all good faith and sincerity, mistake my own hopeful anticipation as a promise from God.

But, I have also learned to trust that an answer will come and that God will be with us as that answer unfolds in our lives.

The Holy Spirit will point us toward the North Star and tell us to keep going in that direction to escape whatever it is that enslaves any portion of our lives or makes us feel segregated from God’s love.

We can faithfully follow Jesus’ advice and “stretch out” to the Lord, confident that he is already stretching out to us.

And have no fear. If Jesus believes it is necessary to break the speed limit to reach us in time, he will.