

Rules for Spiritual Grownups

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joanna C. Leiserson at Calvary Episcopal Church in Cincinnati, Ohio on Sunday, February 5, 2017.

Isaiah 58:1-9a; Psalm 112:1-9; 1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20

If you have ever been a parent—or if you have ever *had* a parent—you are probably familiar with the meandering, hit-and-miss process by which we learn the rules of life. A toddler is told very specific concrete rules, often in reaction to what she is currently doing, so the parent will say things like “Be gentle with the kitty” and “Don’t scribble in that book” and “Let’s keep those green tomatoes on the plant,” sometimes moving to rules like “Don’t put oatmeal in the VCR machine.” To a small child, rules often seem arbitrary. Why can’t I scribble in my own book?

On the other hand, to be a parent trying to articulate these rules of life to a small child, the experience can often seem a bit surreal. We know that certain things make sense, from the perspective of safety, or cleanliness, or social interaction, for example. From our long years of growing up, we learned the basic principles that little children have not yet learned, but as we raise our children, we try to teach the basic principles by teaching them the concrete rules.

Sometimes the mind of the toddler and the mind of the parent seem to be worlds apart—the endless rules have not yet met the basic principles. What is common sense to us is still meaningless to them, without context. So while the small child may wonder, “What did I do? What’s wrong with picking all those green tomatoes?” the parent may think, “I can’t believe I just said that. I can’t believe I’m have to tell him ‘Don’t eat dirt’ and ‘You can’t put that worm on your dinner plate.’” Whether you see these situations from the point of view of the child or from the point of view of a parent, you can probably sense more than a hint of exasperation from the parent, and you can probably hear—or identify with—the reaction of bewildered cluelessness from the child.

As we grow up, we learn how to navigate the world. Those endless rules eventually lump together to form basic principles, so we can figure out the rules of the road by using the basic principle like “Streets are for cars, sidewalks are for people.” We don’t need to remember all the other rules that go along with that, like “Don’t drive on the sidewalk” and “If you walk in the middle of the street, it’s at your own peril.” (That’s why bumper stickers like this are so funny: “If you don’t like my driving, stay off the sidewalk.”) We are grownups now,

But we are not necessarily spiritual grownups—either as individuals or as a whole people. Can you hear the note of parental impatience in God’s voice? *Look*, God says—and you know that God is wagging God’s finger at us—*Look, you say you want to fast so that you can be closer to me, but you gussy it up so much that you forgot what you’re doing it for. So in the end, you’re just saying ‘Look at me!’* Isaiah’s God says, All your fancy festivals and feasts won’t do you any good if you’ve forgotten what they’re for. Is a fast just so you can dress up in sackcloth and ashes and then, feeling oh-so-righteous, go to work and yell at your employees? Are you fasting so you can feel righteously humble enough to pick a fight with your next-door

neighbor who hasn't yet taken down his Christmas decorations because his child is dying? God says, "*You call THIS a fast, a day acceptable to the Lord??*" What's the basic principle here? What is a fast for, anyway? *Look*, God says—and God does sound rather irritated that we should know better. The reason for fasting is not to "bow your head like a bulrush and lie in sackcloth and ashes" so that I would feel sorry for you. You just look like a dead leaf in an ashtray. The reason for fasting is so you can stop paying so much attention to your little daily tasks and root your heart in what you are doing here on this earth, what I created you for. And what is that?—To loose the bonds of injustice, to let the oppressed go free, to share your food with the hungry, give shelter to the homeless, and clothe the ragged.

But we keep forgetting. We're not always spiritual grownups. We are not called "children of God" for no reason! We need to keep being reminded.

Jesus takes after his Father. Can you hear his note of loving parental exasperation? (I wonder what the Holy Spirit sound like when she is exasperated?) Again, like God in Isaiah, he gives us the concrete rules. He knows we are still spiritual children. He also knows what we really are. You are like a lamp in a room—you are the light of the world. You have the spark of love in your being. Why do you then hide it and not let anyone see that love? Lamps don't belong under a basket—onions do. Why act like an onion? No one displays onions in their living room, and no one lights a lamp and then puts it in a box. Lamps are meant to spread light, not to hide in the shade.

Humans don't belong in the shade either. Humans were created by God in love—and *for* love. Humans are meant to spread love just as lamps are meant to spread light. So remember what, and who, you were created for. Remember the basic principle, the basic purpose of your own being, the essence of who you are.

And what is that? We learned it last week from the prophet Micah: "You know, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

We have learned from Jesus also. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

To navigate the spiritual world, just as we learned to navigate this secular world, we need to know these things deep in our bones. Learn those passages, mark, read, inwardly digest them, inscribe them in your heart, carve them into your bones. We were created to be the light of the world, the salt of the earth, the children of God. If we know that in our very bones, all those little rules will fall into place. And when we occasionally forget—when we start to darken the door of our neighbor—we don't need to look at our exasperated God in bewildered cluelessness, saying "Uh, what did I do now?" We can snap our fingers and say, "Oh, yes! I bear light, not darkness! Thanks for the reminder!" And when we get to *become* those rules, when those passages become the essence of who we are—then we are spiritual grownups, and we give glory to God in heaven.