

(Exodus 20:1-17; Psalm 19; John 2:13-22)

Let us pray: Holy One, I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart will be acceptable in your sight, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

On January 13 of this year, I posted on my Facebook page a letter I had seen to a company called Scholastic. I'm not sure if you all know this company, but Scholastic encourages school-aged children to purchase books through monthly flyers that are sent home in backpacks. This is the letter Jaime Brusehoff wrote:

"Dear Scholastic: I've heard you've been targeted ... for offering and celebrating books that are LGBTQ-inclusive. I'm sorry they're targeting you with their ignorance and miseducation.

As the mom of a transgender child, I want to say thank you. What you are doing matters. Your books make a difference. Representation matters, and when my transgender daughter reads a book that features a transgender character, she feels seen, affirmed, and valued. She thrives knowing that her peers are reading books about kids like her too. When she meets a new friend who doesn't quite understand what it means to be transgender, do you know what she does? She hands them a book.

I regularly do trainings for educators and other professionals who work with youth, and when I come with my stack of children's books that celebrate gender creative and transgender kids, they are so happy and relieved. These are essential tools for teaching children about the rich diversity in our world.

Children need opportunities to learn about families, children, and communities that don't look like theirs. They need to learn about people with different interests, cultures, religion, abilities, and identities. Diversity is appropriate for all ages, and books are doorways to compassion and kindness. You make that happen.

Thank you from the bottom of my and my daughter's book loving hearts."

[PAUSE]

One of my conservative Christian relatives replied to my posting of this letter with several different scriptures, but began with this one from Hebrews 13 v. 4: "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral." My relative also wrote: "As Christians, our starting point for understanding human sexuality is Scripture," and she further cited many old and new testament texts on "separations," "holy orderings," "marriage," and spreading "God's image around the world."... and much, much more... I have to say that she shared this all in a very respectful and loving way, which is not how a few of my other conservative friends and relatives share.

But I was still left with the fact that the letter to Scholastic was from the mother of an 11 year old child, and my relative was talking about the marriage bed and adultery.

I prayed, and prayed and prayed, and had some additional Facebook dialogue with her, and prayed and prayed and prayed some more, and realized:

- 1) I needed to read more of the Bible and various commentaries on this topic (and probably write a sermon); and
- 2) I needed to reply to my relative on how my faith informs this issue.

[PAUSE]

Last week when I saw the lectionary scriptures, I thought... here goes:

In our old Testament lesson this week, we have the 10 commandments.

As a young child, I memorized a shorter version of this list which went something like this:

- 1) You shall have no other gods before me.
- 2) You shall not take the Lord's name in vain.

- 3) Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
- 4) Honor your father and mother.
- 5) You shall not kill.
- 6) You shall not commit adultery.
- 7) You shall not steal.
- 8) You shall not lie.
- 9) You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. (At the time, I didn't really understand what "covet" meant)
- 10) You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor, including your neighbor's house, servants, ox or donkey.

The 10 commandments are referred to as God's absolutes on spiritual and moral law. However, there are two other parts of God's law as revealed to the Israelites. The second part is the civil law, which gives the people rules to manage their lives. The third part is the ceremonial law, showing them patterns for building the tabernacle and regular worship.

The Jewish tradition teaches that there are 613 commandments or "mitzvot" and these laws are found in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

(<http://www.jewfaq.org/613.htm>)

10 of these laws have to do with G-d

6 have to do with the Torah/Bible

5 have to do with signs and symbols related to being faithful (including circumcision, head/arm symbols, and symbols for the home)

4 have to do with prayer and blessings

14 of these laws have to do with how to treat all other people

13 more have to do with how to treat the poor and unfortunate

6 have to do with how to treat non-Jews

23 laws are about marriage, divorce and family

36 have to do with times and season (including laws related to the Sabbath and festivals, what to eat, and whether to work or rest)

27 are general dietary laws (many having to do with deciding whether or not animals are clean or unclean prior to deciding if they can be eaten)

14 have to do with business practices (most having to do with honesty)

19 have to do with treatment of employees, servants and slaves

7 have to do with vows, oaths and swearing

17 have to do with the Sabbatical and Jubilee years

36 laws have to do with the court and judicial procedures

4 laws relate to injury and damage

11 relate to property and property rights

7 are criminal laws

24 have to do with punishment and restitution

3 have to do with prophecy

26 laws are on the topic of idolatry

6 have to do with agriculture and 1 with animal care

3 have to do with clothing (including two from Deut 22:5 stating that men and women should not wear each other's clothing and in Deut 22:11 not to wear wool and linen clothing at the same time)

4 have to do with the first born

30 have to do with rules for those working in the temple (Kohein and Levites)

24 have to do with tithes and taxes

33 have to do with the temple, the sanctuary and sacred objects

102 have to do with sacrifices and offerings

16 have to do with ritual purity and impurity

7 laws are about the King

10 laws are about how Nazarites should act

16 have to do with war

And 25 of these 613 laws are about forbidden sexual relationships (mostly about incest, and 1 in Lev 18:23 about male/male sexual relationships)

Of these 613 old testament laws, there are three that could potentially be applicable: 2 laws relating to how transgenders might dress, and one regarding male/male sexual relationships.

That is less than 0.5%, if math interests you.

I also found out that “many of the mitzvot (or laws) cannot be observed today, due to the destruction of the [Second Temple](#), although they still retain religious significance. According to one standard reckoning,^[5] there are 77 positive and 194 negative commandments that can be observed today, of which there are 26 [commands that apply only within the Land of Israel](#).^[6] Furthermore, there are some time-related commandments from which women are exempt (examples include [shofar](#), [sukkah](#), [lulav](#), [tzitzit](#) and [tefillin](#)).^[7] Some depend on the special status of a person in Judaism (such as [kohanim](#)), while others apply only to men or only to women.” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/613_commandments)

$3/271 = 1.1\%$

In looking into why these three particular mitzvot’s were written into the Torah, I found a 2006 document from Conservative Judaism entitled “[HOMOSEXUALITY, HUMAN DIGNITY & HALAKHAH \(huh-LUHKH-khuh\): A COMBINED RESPONSUM FOR THE COMMITTEE ON JEWISH LAW AND STANDARDS](#)” (https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/halakhah/teshuvot/20052010/dorff_nevins_reisner_dignity.pdf)

[Halakhah \(huh-LUHKH-khuh\)](#) was a new word for me, and means: “Lit. the path that one walks. Jewish law. The complete body of rules and practices that Jews are bound to follow, including biblical commandments, commandments instituted by the rabbis, and binding customs.”

Two of the questions addressed in this document are:

What guidance does halakhah offer to Jews who are homosexual? and
How shall Conservative Judaism relate to gay and lesbian couples?

The responsum starts with a quote from the 11th chapter of Isaiah, from the 10th verse: “The light of the Messiah, when it blazes in the heart, teaches one to dignify all people: It shall be on that day that the root of Jesse will stand as a sign to the nations, and peoples will seek him, and his consolation shall be dignity.”

The responsum further states that: “Contemporary Jewish law is based upon the legal and moral texts found in the Written and Oral Torah. The Written Torah famously pronounces that “God created humanity in His image” (Genesis 1:27; 9:6), that “It is not good for man to live alone” (Genesis 2:18), that you must “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) and that “God is good to all; His mercies apply to all creatures” (Psalms 145:9). The Oral Torah (Talmud, Midrash and Codes) draws upon these and many other biblical passages to create a system of law that sanctifies the daily lives of those who serve God in truth.” And that... “those motivated to live within the framework of halakhah are necessarily willing to accept limits on personal autonomy—as long as they are feasible—for the sake of pursuing a life of holiness. Others may object that human dignity is a peripheral concern of the halakhah incapable of modifying our ancient sexual ethic. We, however, believe that dignity is a central concern of the Written and Oral Torah and is a well established halakhic principle. We approach this challenging subject with reverence for God, humility, and with respect for the dignity of humans, all of whom are created in the divine image.”

The responsum also says that: “Human beings cannot choose their sexual orientation. Sexual orientation emerges for most people in early adolescence or late childhood without any prior sexual experience. The experience of sexual attraction and falling in love is one that individuals experience as outside their conscious control. Although we can choose whether to act on our feelings, psychologists do not consider sexual orientation to be a conscious choice.” (Adapted from “Answers to Your Questions about Homosexuality and Sexual Orientation” American Psychological Association)

So how do these 613 commandments make sense as followers of Christ?

Our New Testament lesson in the 2nd chapter of John finds Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem just before Passover. In the Message, we hear that: “Jesus... found the Temple teeming with people selling cattle and sheep and doves. The loan sharks were also there in full strength. Jesus put together a whip out of strips of leather and chased them out of the Temple, stampeding the sheep and cattle, upending the tables of the loan sharks, spilling coins left and right. He told the dove merchants, “Get your things out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a shopping mall!”

Jesus was angry!

In William Barclay’s commentary on this text, he explains that:

- The Passover was the greatest of all Jewish feasts.
- Jewish law said that any adult male living within 15 miles of Jerusalem was required to come to Jerusalem for Passover.
- Every adult over age 19 was required by law to pay a Temple tax at Passover
- The tax was one half-shekel (6p or about 8 cents, which was ~ 2 days wages) per person.
- Pilgrims from other countries had to pay the Temple tax in shekels, so money changers were at the Temple to help, but the money changing fee was another 4p (or 6 cents): another day’s wage. We are now at 3 days wages.
- In addition to money changers, there were in the temple, sellers of oxen, sheep and doves that could be purchased for ritual sacrifice. Animals had to be inspected to ensure that they were perfect and unblemished.
- Doves purchased outside the temple cost about 4p (or 6 cents, another days wage, we are now at 4 days of wages), while those purchased inside the temple cost about 75p (almost 19 days wages, for a total of 23 days of wages).
- Inspectors in the temple almost always found that the animals brought from outside not acceptable. The humble and poor were being fleeced.

Barclay tells us that Jesus was also angry because:

- The place where all the animal selling and money changing was occurring was in the Court of the Gentiles. Foreigners could not go further into the temple than this particular court. Imagine trying to worship and pray in the midst of “the lowing of... oxen, the bleating of... sheep, the cooing of... doves, the shouts of... hucksters, the rattle of... coins, (and)... voices raised in bargaining disputes...”
- By turning over the money changer’s tables and driving the animals from the Court of the Gentiles, Jesus was also saying that animal sacrifices were not pleasing to Yahweh. (102 of the 613 mitzvot or laws are about sacrifices and offerings) In Matthew 5:17, Jesus says “Don’t misunderstand why I have come – it isn’t to cancel the laws of Moses... No I came to fulfill them and to make them all come true.” Jesus’ life: a sacrifice for us.

In Matthew 22:34-40, A Pharisee and scholar asked Jesus: “Teacher, which command in God’s Law is the most important?” And Jesus replied, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.’ This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: ‘Love others as well as you love yourself.’ These two commands are pegs; everything in God’s Law and the Prophets hangs from them.” (The Message)

“Jesus himself flouted the law when he healed people on the Sabbath. But he never said that he was abolishing the Sabbath – just that compassion is always the higher law.”

In some places in the Bible, Jesus did speak tough love to people regarding their sins... but his friends were the tax collectors and prostitutes... and he was a living witness to how to live and love compassionately.

The 11 year old transgender child I told you about earlier, tried to commit suicide when she was 7. Her Mom writes: “In the years before she transitioned to live as HER authentic self in the world, my husband and I watched our child grow more and more anxious. We watched as she became increasingly uncomfortable in her own body and confused about her place in the world. We watched as depression took over, and before we knew it, we had a seven-year-old child in crisis. We had a seven-year-old child who pushed out the screen of her second story window and tried to jump out, a seven-year-old child who wanted to die. We have never been more scared in our lives.”

[PAUSE]

When I think of the unconditional love God has for God's children, Jesus, me, all of you - I think about the love of a parent for their child, no matter what.

"In a world so full of hurts, God's promise to us can also be a model for us. As God's people, we are called to compassion, to come close to those in pain; whether that be a family member or a stranger. The human soul cries out for kindness – each tender touch and kind word connects us to the healing power of heaven."

One of my absolute favorite bloggers is a Christian woman named Glennon Melton. In 2012 she wrote about this issue of old testament law revealed through the teachings of Jesus and I'm going to read to you what Glennon said (<http://momastery.com/blog/2012/05/28/i-think-jesusd-be-gay-or-no-she-didnt/>):

"When Jesus was living out His life on Earth, most folks thought of Him as Sinny McSinnerton.

Jesus – although He was a devout synagogue-going Jew- appeared to be walking around purposely breaking the laws in the Torah. This was nothing short of scandalous at the time. Scandalous enough to get a guy crucified. Because the Torah is the book that the Jews in that day (and today) view as The Sacred, Inerrant Word of God. A faithful Jew did NOT stray from the rules in that book. Especially the religious leaders of that time, the Sadducees and the Pharisees. They PRIDED themselves on how closely they clung to these laws. Understandably.

Then along came Jesus. Jesus healed people on holy days, interacted with unclean women, hung with folks from the wrong side of the tracks, and told the world that some of the most religious folks were actually the most wicked folks around.* The religious leaders of the day were absolutely scandalized. Here was a RABBI, openly defying the rules CLEARLY WRITTEN IN THE TORAH. The WORD OF GOD. Jesus appeared to be demonstrating a blatant disregard for what appeared to be the rules.

The Pharisees confronted Him with this apparent treachery time and time again. They continuously tried to catch him breaking the rules, then demanded He explain himself. Once, when Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath (BIG NO, NO. NO – working on the Sabbath- as clearly stated in the Torah) the Pharisees said AHA! How can you justify doing that? It's clearly stated as wrong! Right here- in black and white! In the Torah, the Sacred Jewish script- and you call yourself a Jew!

And Jesus said, "If one of your lambs was stuck in a hole on the Sabbath . . . wouldn't it be the right thing to get him out? Wouldn't you do that for your lamb? And aren't people much more important than lambs?" **

In other words: Isn't there a law of love in our hearts that overrides the individual laws in our books? Is there not? Jesus knew there was, because He created their hearts. He was asking them to trust their conscience. To trust the Love He put in their heart. To use not only their scripture, but common sense.

This sort of talk made the religious leaders nervous. What would happen if everyone just started walking around, following the laws of Love?? For one thing- they might've been out of a job. They were terrified. That happens – you know – when common folk start to question established rules; start to raise their hands and ask permission to look at things differently. Questioners get SQUASHED. Or crucified, or humiliated, or hushed, because people in power get nervous. But in response to the religious leaders fear and anger about the "rule changing" – Jesus says something interesting. He says, "I have not come to abolish the law, I have come to fulfill every letter." But he promises this WHILE He's clearly breaking the little laws. So what did He mean by that? Could He have meant that there is an Ultimate Law, a law that starts to rise at the first page of every sacred script and falls on the last page like rainbow? A law that's stamped into our hearts and weaved into all of creation? Could that law be LOVE? Could Love be the law we are to follow, when in doubt? Even when it means breaking a smaller law? Just like Jesus did, again and again and again???

And so I just wonder...what form would Jesus take if he came back to Earth again? If the form He chose last time is any indicator, He'd appear as someone whom religious leaders and we common people would least expect. Last time, they were sure He'd come as a powerful king and He arrived as an homeless infant. I wonder what He'd say, who He'd befriend, how He'd live, WHO He'd be this time around? Again, if past behavior is indicative of future behavior- His way of being and friends and every word He said would scandalize and challenge the religious folks of today, and He'd walk

around breaking THE WORD OF GOD for Love. He would challenge and change all of our perceptions about who is in and who is out and He would ask us to fulfill the law, not by nitpicking isolated scriptures that have been translated by humans for centuries but by soaking in and understanding His entire message. The whole rainbow. LOVE.

LOVE GOD and LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR. AND PS. EVERYONE IS YOUR NEIGHBOR.

How would He hammer His LOVE GOD AND YOUR NEIGHBOR message into our heads today, in this time, in this culture, in this country? Who are God's children in this day and age that might be considered the least of these, the oppressed, the disenfranchised, the people religious leaders are least likely to embrace? How would He turn the religious world upside down once again?

[GLENNON WRITES] I think Jesus would come back as a poor, black, gay teenage girl.

I've been reading scripture and observing the world around me for a decade and this is the ONLY prediction that makes sense to me.

So I think all you folks waiting for the second coming should leave your pews and start hanging out on Skid Row or the high school LGBT meetings. Because often Love looks nothing like what we expect.

God, I love my counter culture, subversive, scandalous Jesus."

[THANK YOU GLENNON]

Rudy Francisco is an amazing poet, that I encourage you to find online. He wrote one particular poem that I want to share with you and it goes like this:

"Perhaps
we should love ourselves
so fiercely,
that when others see us
they know exactly how it should be done."

I think we also, perhaps,
should love others, like the 11 year old transgender girl named Rebekah:
I think we should love her and all the children "so fiercely,
that when others see us,
they too will know exactly how it should be done"...

In Romans 15:7, Paul writes: "Therefore accept each other just as Christ has accepted you so that God will be given glory."

Let us pray

Dear God,
Thank you that you hear our cries,
Thank you that you draw close to the broken-hearted.
Lord, we lift up to you people we know that are hurting,
Please be with us all, holding us, and comforting us.
Restore our hearts and theirs with your closeness,
Draw near to the world, Yahweh,
And restore the heart of our community, and our relationships.
In your holy name we pray.
Amen.