



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Law - No Laughing Matter

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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There is an order of monks in New Skete, New York that are known for their dog breeding and training. I ordered their CD set when we got Juno and have been working with her, using the monks' method. It is really effective and Juno is learning a lot. It's a good thing that we live in Branford and not Hartford because there is an old law on the books in the capital city that makes it illegal to educate a dog. Wow.

There are actually a lot of loony sounding laws still on the books all over the place. Here's one of my favorites; in Missouri it is illegal to drive down the highway with an uncaged bear in your car. It sounds like a good rule to live by anyway, but seriously, how many incidents were there before they passed the law? How about this one? If you are driving through parts of rural Pennsylvania, you must stop every mile and send up a rocket signal. This only becomes clear when you read the other part of the ordinance. If you see a nervous team of horses coming your way, you are to take your car apart, piece by piece, and hide it under the bushes. It's the law!

In Orlando, FL, if you park your elephant at a parking meter, you will get a ticket if you don't pay the same amount as a car. In North Dakota, it's illegal to sell pretzels and beer at the same time. I wonder if their tourism board is aware of that!

There are some states which haven't ever actually gotten with the women's movement. In Dennison, TX and Bristol, TN, adjusting your stockings in public can get you thrown in the slammer for up to 12 months. If you live in Michigan, technically, your husband owns your hair and you must get his permission to cut it. In Charlotte, NC women are not to leave the house wearing less than 16 yards of fabric. And even in NYC, wearing clingy, body hugging clothing can result in a fine of \$25. In not enforcing this law, they are overlooking a great revenue stream. And here's my favorite law for the little woman; in TN women are not to drive unless there is a man with a red flag in the front of the car as a warning to others on the road. We've come such a long way, baby!

Blue laws are still very much alive - as we well know here in CT with the recent overturning of the ban on alcohol sales on Sunday. But in Winona Lake, WI, it's illegal to eat ice cream at a counter on Sunday and Kansas bans cherry pie a la mode. Marbles, dominoes and yo-yos are Sunday no-nos in several states. And here's one that bridges the silly women laws and the blues. In Florida, unmarried women are prohibited from parachuting on the Lord's Day.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

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Periodic Civil code overhauls are apparently a good idea. Even when they happen, stray laws can escape the updating. All of this silliness illustrates how society changes. What is deemed seriously important at one time can cause jaws to drop at another. But we also get a window into attitudes from other times. It's not that long ago women had precious little autonomy, it was nearly impossible to get credit; property was held by the men in the family. If you don't own your own hair, that says something. What it also says is that women were really thought of as infantile, not capable of clear thinking or pretty much anything else. If we are of a mind to be generous - and that's a pretty big IF - we can see these laws as intended to protect and shelter women. It wasn't thought of as discriminatory; it was an indication of what was considered true. Such laws come from and reinforce cultural attitudes. One could contend that they held patriarchal power in place. It wasn't easy to rewrite such attitudes. Women were arrested for wearing pants and teaching about birth control. Women still encounter the mindsets behind the old laws in the workplace and in a whole lot of laws that have been passed this year - women can't be trusted to make difficult decision about their own bodies and lives.

Laws always need to be revisited and evaluated. Are they still needed? Do they go too far or not far enough? Are they being enforced equitably? Do we really understand why they were passed in the first place? Are they serving the goals for which they were enacted? This was something that Jesus weighed in on, on more than one occasion - today's Gospel is an example of it. While the Gospels never use the language of the distinction between the spirit and the letter of the law, that's a decent interpretation of some of Jesus' acts.

First let us consider why laws exist in the first place. They are the rule for living in community. When there is a good and just system of laws in place, people can live together in harmony. There are clear expectations - don't steal your neighbor's cow - and a process for dealing with transgressions. Understanding that the purpose of the law is the health of the community makes a big difference when interpreting how laws are to be enforced. The laws that the Jewish people embraced also had the intent of keeping them in right relationship with God. A people cannot be right with God if their laws are not just. Laws therefore are meant to protect the poor, the defenseless, and the oppressed. Jesus always had great respect and love for the law. It was never his intention to undermine it or degrade it. His claim to fulfilling the law was, I believe, an exercise in lifting up the spirit behind the letter of the law.

The laws concerning the Sabbath are very practical laws. The human animal needs rest and refreshment. That applied to servants as well as masters. It would be unjust and against the law to expect others to work every day without a break. So the Sabbath law was also a law of freedom from tyranny. Charles Dickens actively opposed Sabbath laws in England that banned all public activities of a recreational nature. He saw them as unjustly imposing restriction on how the poor and working class people could spend their only day off. Dickens felt that everyone should be able to determine for themselves what rest and refreshment looked like.

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For the woman in the Gospel today, she is not described as needing physical healing, but rather release from the spirit that oppressed her so that she could not stand up straight. And so, Jesus does not "cure" her, he releases her from that which oppressed her. And we get a clue to a part of that. As with many women in the Gospel stories, Jesus gives them standing by referring to them as daughter or sister - meaning that they are no longer without protection. Our woman today is given great honor as he calls her "daughter of Abraham." She can now stand tall in her community.

The spirit of the law is liberty and freedom and love. Jesus points out that we all take care of human necessities on the Sabbath. We let the dog out, feed ourselves and family, reach out to someone in need. On the Sabbath, needs are met in freedom. It is possible to think of the Sabbath as a foretaste of heaven, like the Eucharist. It is the period of time freed from worry, dedicated to wholeness. Taken to extreme, laws about the Sabbath can rob it of its joy, they can obliterate the freedom they are meant protect.

Suzanne Guthrie is an Episcopal priest who writes a lot about the sacredness of time. She had this to say about this Gospel story;

"Of COURSE Jesus healed on the Sabbath! The Sabbath is the sphere of heaven hovering, resting over earth, merging with earth, tantalizing us with the hope of completion and healing, justice and mercy and beauty and rest. Jesus, the Word made flesh, joined heaven to earth and earth to heaven, as we say in the Christmas blessing. And heaven, of course, not as a place in the sky but a quality, an influence, a consciousness, a beauty at the heart of the unfolding universe and in the dark unknown of the soul."

Jesus wasn't abolishing the law; he was fulfilling it in the life of the woman, the daughter of Abraham, and in us.