

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:15 Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
All Saints' Sunday – November 3, 2019

“Not Just a Rule”

Scripture: Luke 6:20-31; All Saints C

[Speaking a bit tongue-in-cheek...]

It's a serious problem, people. Of course, I'm speaking of *the expansion of the tax code of the United States of America*. By some estimates, the code has swelled to well over 70,000 pages. 70,000! But take heart... I'm here to dispel that rumor and comfort you entirely. See, that 70,000 pages that takes over your life in some form and fashion each year leading up to April 15th is really largely made up of thousands of pages *about* the tax code. You'll be relieved to know that by many estimates, the actual tax code is only about 2,600 pages. Whew! I don't know about you, but I'm feeling a real sense of relief.

Goodness!... but we are complicated creatures, we human beings. Think of how hard we work just to figure out how to live together. We have some 54 volumes of Federal Legal Code, libraries full of laws and legal opinions in every state in the union, municipal codes, rules, ordinances, and regulations. Over 600 laws, or Mitzvahs, in the Jewish tradition, and even our Episcopal Church has a volume of

Canon Law that comes out to around 415 pages, and our Catechism in the *Book of Common Prayer* is, well, pretty good actually at just 17 pages.

I think what I am trying to get at here is that I'm pretty appreciative that Jesus sort of breaks things down for us this morning on how we're supposed to live together. Expounding wisdom much older than himself, Jesus reminds us of that tenet of *reciprocity*... for the good... "you may be hungry now, but someday you will be full," or for the worse... "you may be laughing now, but someday you won't be so happy." It's not so much a threat, I think, than a reminder... a reminder to live faithfully with both patience and humility. The tides can turn in life, and those who once struggled may find relief, while those who think all is well will lose all they have. It's a reminder that we can't live complacently in a world where resources are unbalanced and people are unfair. We have to matter to each other, and looking out for the best interests of others is in our own best interests. The trouble is... that can be really hard! And that is why when somebody somehow seems to manage to do it, we call them... saints. Well, *we* call them saints. Maybe Jesus just calls them... faithful, ordinary. I mean, all of us are called to be saints.

So, let's break it down a little. And I will do it in just a couple of pages... No need to get too complicated. Jesus gives us the summary... Simply, and sometime

uncomfortably, put, it's like this: We are called to be people who love our enemies. People who do good to those who do us wrong. Who bless those who curse us. People who welcome those that others reject. Who give freely to those who need something, even those who take things from us. These are the marks of sainthood. And really these are the actions carried out hundreds of times each day by quiet women, men, and children of faith all over this earth... people whose names you know, like Stephen and Francis and Nicholas and Teresa and Desmond, and people of whom we will never hear. All these people are the signs of the continuing presence of God with us. The trouble with this world is not that some are rich, but that others are very poor and too often forgotten. It is not that some are wicked, but that others contest wickedness with wickedness in return. It is not that some are appreciated, but rather that others are disparaged, and too often they are disparaged only for reasons of fear and prejudice. "Do to others as you would have them do to you" is no quaint aphorism, but an earnest call to our full God-given humanity.

A couple things about the Golden Rule... first, it's a lot older than Jesus. Some portion of humankind has been espousing some form of this ethic for thousands and thousands of years. We might say that Jesus was listening in Hebrew School, because that is where he learned it. Jesus didn't make it up. Remember that "Love you neighbor as you love yourself" commandment? Sounds a bit like the Golden Rule,

right? Second, it's too bad we made the Golden Rule into a rule, because you know what people like to do with rules?... Yes, break them. Really I see "Do to others as you would have them do to you" as a way of life. And you may have to struggle with that, you have to live and learn what that means, because we are always learning about life. Maybe it's like "Do to others as you would have them do to you". Or sometimes it's more like "Don't do to others what you wouldn't want them to do to you." Or maybe it's like "Treat others as you would like to be treated... but take the time first to ask someone how they would like to be treated, so you don't assume they like the same things you do." See, it gets complicated, even when we try to make it simple.

So, how to be saints on this All Saints' Day? Well, I think the saints are those who follow in the way of Jesus, and when Jesus reached out to others, when he comforted and blessed the poor and the hungry and the sad and the outcast, he didn't do it from a distance. He did it with his hands, his feet, his voice, his spit, his sweat, his body, his very life. I think that is how we have to do it. And apparently we can't force people to do that with rules. We have lots of rules already, but not everybody follows them. So we have to practice a way of being, something that we make natural to ourselves and share in the world around us. And to learn a way of being, to get good at it, we have to practice it. And sometimes we will succeed, and sometimes

we will fail, but hopefully we will learn from our failures. But at least... are we practicing?

Once upon a time, a Gentile, a non-Jew, came to the Rabbi Hillel and asked if he might become a Jew, but required that in order to do so, the Rabbi had to explain all the laws, all the codes, all the rules and regulations and ordinances of Judaism to him in a time while he was standing only on one foot. And the wise Rabbi said to the man: “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Law [Torah]; the rest is the explanation; go and learn.” If we can try that, we will live like the saints.