



February 12, 2023

## Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

*"Give me discernment, that I may observe your law and keep it with all my heart."*

*Psalm 119:34*



Dear Friends,

Many of us grew up with traditional rules, discipline, and structures that created a container that was often based on exclusion. As we grew the container became tight and oppressive. So, we began to say no against self-serving laws, traditions, and cultural practices that try and pose as the "will of God." So, we no longer are willing to prop up the status quo or to believe that this legalism is all there is to life.

There has been a reaction to rigid structure and rule-based child rearing of the past. In recent decades many have been raised with the idea to be 'free.' Freedom is conceived in a negative way. Freedom is not to have boundaries and rules. We say we want our children to decide for themselves what is right for them. Basically, we are asking our children to start from zero without any guardrails of community wisdom and tradition. We fail to teach them that freedom is best exercised in service to others.

With a rigid rule only structure we can become neurotic. When I was young it seemed like everything was sinful if not mortally (send you to hell) sinful. But we have moved from this kind of world to a world where I alone determine what is good or bad for me. This is the root of much of the narcissism in our culture today.

I believe the healthiest people are those who received from parents and early authority figures a combination of unconditional and conditional love. We need boundaries to butt up against to form a proper ego and identity. This goads us to internalize our own deeper values, educate our feelings, and dethrone our own narcissism. We also need to know that when we fail, we are still loved.

Jesus was an observant Jew, but one who redirected the meaning of observance. In our Gospel passage from Matthew, Jesus takes aim at the scribes. These are the legal scholars who specialized in the Law (Torah) and its proper observance. Jesus in the beatitudes has already described those whom God highly esteems: the poor in spirit, the sorrowing, the hungering, the peacemakers, those longing for justice. Jesus reacts against religious hypocrisy with displays of legal observance that hides inner corruption and imposes merciless virtue on the least and lowly. He wants us to search our minds and hearts for those things which threaten good relations within the community.

Jesus singles out anger, adultery, and lying. For Jesus ending the feud should take precedence even over worship in the Temple. He advises not to let anger grow, reconcile early on. In the strictly enforced separation of men and women in this society adultery was hard to conceal when it happened. Usually, adultery was less a result of passion than a deliberate attempt by one man to shame another. Jesus forbids adultery to challenge another man's honor, the results are too devastating. The context for lying was the marketplace. There was no Food and Drug Administration to guarantee honesty. As a result, a seller would swear "by my head" or "by my beard" or "by Jerusalem" but if they refused to swear by God fights would arise. Jesus' response is to be honest and direct all the time.

Historically, the role of the Law and the commandments was directed toward preserving the life of the Israelite community. In a culture of honor-driven blood feuds the Law was a guardrail. In honor-bound societies murder, theft (which is adultery) and lying require retaliation. The Law was designed to reign in these destructive tendencies. This is why Sirach says, "*keep the commandments, they will save you.*" Jesus takes this further telling his followers to look for honorable ways out of situations that could lead to feuds and death. Jesus invites us to both unconditional and conditioned love. Our motives must be for the good of all. In our own feuding and combative society, we need the wisdom of Jesus. How might we end the violence that is escalated by egoism and narcissism that poisons much of the social media? Coming to this knowledge is the work we must do if we are to be true followers of Jesus.

Peace,

*Fr Ron*

*Esta carta está en español en el sitio web: [www.anne.church](http://www.anne.church)*