

Proper 17, Year B

- Good to be back – good to be here at Grace, but especially good after being gone on vacation
- I love vacation, but after being away for a while I always end up finding that I'm not quite built for vacation – the idea of not having any demands placed on me, not having anywhere to be or anything to do is an appealing one...
- But then after I've been on vacation for as little as a day or two, I always find that the lack of structure is actually bad for me, personally – before I leave, I tend to think of all the things I'll catch up on, all the reading I'll get done, all the things I've been putting off that I'll finally have time for... and after the fact, I always find myself wondering where the time went – why I didn't get more done
- Don't get me wrong – I think that vacation, and by extension Sabbath time, are deeply good for us – we need opportunities for dormancy, the chance to let certain fields in our lives lie fallow for a time so that they can be rich and fruitful in other seasons - and it's certainly helpful to take a break from our routine, to step back from our life habits - maybe break some bad ones, maybe even establish some good ones (while my family and I were in Maine, for example, our phones worked intermittently at times, and it was a great chance for me to realize just how often I'm accustomed to checking my phone, and to spend a lot less time time doing that and a lot more time actually enjoying the company of my family - even passed a wooden sign in a shop that said, "my phone didn't work, so I had to spend time with my family - they seem like nice people")
- But for me, on vacation, I realize that without any structure whatsoever, I find I get very little done - And I'm talking about more than just the lost hours from sleeping in
- I need rules not only just because I find it helpful to have some direction, but also because of the effect they have on everything having to do with my life - I'm actually more productive in a smaller amount of free time I have when the rest of my life is governed by some rules, some principles that tell me the things I need to get to done, than I am when I'm on vacation and all bets are off
- In other words, left to my own devices, and without any rules at all, I don't do nearly as well as I'd like to think I will do - more like I revert several levels down the evolutionary chain and develop the willpower of a single-celled organism, just drifting along, doing and dealing with whatever it is that crosses the path I've already been set upon
- In fact, this is a sort of a theme for my life – do you find that to be true? That certain

themes show up again and again in ways that come to define your life? - one of those themes for my life is that one: that sometimes rules are not only freeing, help us to not only do more than we would without them, but are in fact actually necessary in order to shape us into the people we're meant to be

- As a result, one of the schools of thought I am deeply influenced by is called "Virtue Ethics" - school of ethical thought that focuses on people rather than on deeds or outcomes - and says, essentially, we are what we habitually do - in other words - we are known by our habits, and so it is important to concern ourselves with thinking about everything that we do, including and even especially those things that we do habitually, that we do without even thinking
- It says, essentially, if we want to be good people, we have to be willing to behave like good people often enough that it becomes a habit, that we do it almost automatically - the only way I know how to do that is by thinking long and hard about what kind of person I want to be, and developing some rules that I can try to follow to make me that way
- And that brings me to our readings today:
- I've often seen preachers take the readings that we have paired this morning as a sort of illustration of the contrast between law and grace - that the Old Testament story of Moses telling Israel to follow the law is just meant to highlight the rules which were put in place that people could never manage to follow - and in the NT Jesus comes along and tells us we don't actually have to follow those rules at all, that all is forgiven and all that matters is not what rules we follow
- In a sense that last part is true - the work of Christ is that we are all justified with God - After all, in one of our Eucharistic Prayers we pray to God saying, "in him, you have delivered us from evil and made us worthy to stand before you."
- But Jesus also says elsewhere that he came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it - and in fact, in our Gospel today what he actually says is that sure, the laws about ritual purity (and, by extension, the human tradition that has arisen out of the law) may not be as important as some other things, but then he gives a list of those other things that are more important, and darned if every one doesn't imply a rule about **the ways that we deal with each other** - list he gives is this one: fornication, theft, murder, adultery, avarice, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, folly - all of these are words to describe a violation of some rule given by God
- Far from saying "there are no rules," Jesus seems to be saying, "some rules are more

important than others.”

- And James says something similar in the Epistle: “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”
- Both James and Jesus are saying, let’s look at the rules that we’re following, and making sure that they’re the right ones - are they merely traditions that we haven’t looked at in a while, that maybe aren’t as edifying as they could be? Are they ones that are shaping us into the kind of people that we’re called to be? Are they the type of rules that also make us fruitful in other unforeseen ways?
- It’s a difficult question to ask, and **especially** for us as Episcopalians, right? Preaching about examining our traditions is dangerous territory, but especially in a denomination that still refers to the 1979 Book of Common Prayer as “the **new** Prayer Book”
- A denomination about whom I’ve heard it lovingly joked that if we do something once it’s an anomaly, twice it’s a trend and three times it’s a tradition - we get rather attached to our customs and our ways of doing things in the Episcopal Church
- You may or may not have heard when I gave a sermon several weeks back and mentioned that in the adult forum this fall we’ll be looking at one new way of shaping our lives, one possible new set of rules for us to adopt called The Way of Love: Practices for a Jesus-centered Life
- It’s a Rule of Life, a set of guidelines that we lay out for ourselves, and this particular one that we’ll be looking at beginning next week has seven different practices to help us deepen our faith, encounter Christ more clearly and more regularly, spread the Good News - in short, it’s a set of rules to help us build those good habits so as to be, as James says, “doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive ourselves.”
- Because the contrast Jesus describes in our Gospel today isn’t between law and an utter lack of law because God loves us and wants us to just do as we please - it’s between a human tradition which is self-focused, meant to show off, show how much *I* know about what to do, what’s right and wrong, and between a law which governs how we actually relate to God and to one another
- He’s saying that our law, our **rules**, ought to be ones which shape us into the people that God wants us to be, the people we were created to be, the holy people of God
- I hope you’ll join me for the adult formation hour starting next week as we look at some of

those rules, try to form some of those habits

- Because while Jesus isn't saying we have to earn God's love, he is saying that what we do **matters**
- It matters because we are affected, we are shaped by our own actions, and it matters for the sake of this world that God loves so deeply
- Let's ask ourselves, together, "Are we the people that God wants us to be?"