

Getting beyond *as if* (Isaiah 58:1-9a; Psalm 112:1-9; 1 Corinthians 2:1-12; Matthew 5:13-20)

The prescription for the persistent malady of God's people

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Some years ago, there emerged about as brief a rebuke as our language has produced: *as if*. A sort of shorthand version of "not only no, but hell no!"

Within a proclamation of the Almighty, it's an even sharper rebuke. "Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, *as if* they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God." No wonder the charge to the prophet is, "do not hold back!"

Getting beyond the *as if* adherence to the letter of the law is an explicit or implicit theme in all of this Sunday's readings. It is the prescription for the persistent malady of God's people, a malady so often pointed out by Jesus in his encounters with the scribes and Pharisees. It can be terrifying to hear Jesus say that our righteousness must exceed theirs, until we recall what he says of their righteousness.

Likewise, Jesus' warning that "until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished," is at first blush enough to make one despondent. No wonder Jesus eventually has to assure his disciples that this is impossible for mere mortals, but "for God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26).

Jesus' point, like that of Isaiah and the psalmist, is that ultimately, freedom from the law is freedom through the law --not its abolishment, but its fulfillment. Being human, we will never experience that *full*-fillment because of our perpetual temptation to focus on every jot and tittle, rather than on the fullness of life that lies beyond. We are ever drawn to read the commandments the way W.C. Fields is said to have read the Bible: "I'm looking for loopholes."

We don't bear the titles of scribe or Pharisee, but that doesn't mean we don't become our own version of them from time to time, our own incarnation of Dana Carvey's Church Lady, blind to our own hypocrisy. The good works that lead others to "give glory to your Father in heaven" aren't the works of letter-and-stroke, jot-and-tittle adherence but, as Isaiah declared, those of freeing the oppressed, feeding the hungry, and sheltering the homeless poor. This is what it is to "delight in the commandments," as the psalmist puts it, or to see beyond what human wisdom can make plausible to that which can only be "spiritually discerned," as Paul tells the Corinthians.

That way of fulfilling the commandments can happen only when we're willing to follow the way of Christ crucified, unafraid to die even to letter-perfect obedience for the sake of being resurrected in life lived for others. This is one perspective on Luther's "sin boldly, and repent more boldly still"--run to the aid of a stranger, and apologize later for ignoring the "Keep off the grass" sign. See the human need God gifts and calls us to address, not the letter of the law that becomes the excuse not to.

That notion of an improper focus brings to mind a scene from the movie *Patch Adams*, in which Arthur, a fellow patient in an asylum, asks Patch to tell him how many fingers he sees. Arthur holds up four but works with Patch until he can see eight--until his vision of the fingers is doubled because he's focusing not on the fingers but on Arthur, seeing not the problem but the solution. When it comes to God's law, the letter itself can be the problem, until we focus beyond it to the people whose need we can perceive.

Like all denominations, mine has a lengthy and specific code of conduct for its clergy, and it is amazing how many pastors become lawyers when they're confronted with their violation of that code. In the synod I serve as bishop, we encourage leaders simply to obey the 11th Commandment: "Don't be an idiot." When leaders respond, in good Lutheran fashion, "What does this mean?" we

explain, "Tell the truth, return your phone calls, texts, and emails, and keep your pants on." Yes, it's a gross oversimplification, but if all clergy could focus on integrity and responsiveness in their relationships, my job would not be a full-time job.

To preach and follow a crucified Christ is to get beyond *as if* adherence. It is to know the freedom of obedience not to the letter of the law but to the author of the law-- who calls us to a life lived for others, that our light may indeed shine before others.