

Laws are the governing rules of reality. We don't often think of it, but creation itself is the first Bible, the first unequivocal utterance of the Divine Word. And, as such, the laws of nature, even though they don't appear in the Bible, are Divine Laws governing how things work. But even these laws are not absolute; they interact with one another in ways that keep creation growing, changing, and evolving.

For instance, the law of gravity says that if you step off your roof you will regret it. It's a law. But at short distances, the law of magnetism is more powerful than the law of gravity. So if you happen to have a large crane dangling an electromagnet close enough to the spot where you step off your roof, you'll go up instead ... unless you aren't wearing anything metal, in which case the law of gravity is still going to get you. The point is, laws aren't absolute, they interact with and are subject to each other and to other higher natural laws in different circumstances. Higher laws always trump or moderate lower laws.

It is the same way with laws governing human behavior. Some laws take precedence over other laws. If the State of Oklahoma passed a law saying that no one could criticize the state government, Federal constitutional law would take precedence as a higher law and make that law null and void. To give another example, if you shoot someone, the law says you must go to jail. But if the person you shot was shot because she was endangering a life (yours, or someone else's), then the need to protect life - the reason there is a law against shooting people -- trumps the law against shooting people.

So it is with Divine Law. Some laws always take precedence over others, and there are always exceptions built in. As Jesus himself notes, if your donkey falls into a pit on the Sabbath, everyone knows it is OK to pull it out, even though such activity constitutes work which is otherwise prohibited on the Sabbath. As Jesus says, it's always lawful to do good.

Indeed, “doing good,” doing the right thing, always trumps strict adherence to the law. In Christian teaching, we know we are doing good when we follow the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” (The rabbinic take on this idea is framed negatively: “Don’t do to others what you wouldn’t want done to you.” The 18th century philosopher Emmanuel Kant said that this principle is the foundation of all moral action: “Act only upon that maxim whereby thou canst, at the same time, will that it should become universal law.”)

But today Jesus teaches us that even the Golden Rule turns upon a higher law, found in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” and to a second law, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

About three decades ago I awoke from a very terrifying dream that has affected me ever since (terrifying enough to remember vividly three decades later). I don’t think

I've ever had a dream about a bible story; but in this dream, I was walking through the wheat field with Jesus and his disciples on a Sabbath, rolling the heads of wheat in my palms and eating the grain. Suddenly, the clouds began to boil overhead and I knew that God -- or at least, the image of God I had been raised with, the one who looks to punish folks who break his rules *rather severely* -- that God was coming to punish us for breaking the Sabbath Rules. I shot up in the bed with the astounded realization that, in the light of this Bible story my old understanding of God needed to be revised and that, according to this story, doing what is right and good always trumps doing what the law requires, even the black letter, clear as day, carved in stone law.

Technically, what Jesus and his disciples were doing did violate rules against traveling on the Sabbath (walking through the fields) and working on the Sabbath (harvesting the grain). This was considered a violation of the second commandment to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, and potentially punishable *by being stoned to death*.

In defending his disciples, Jesus offers a different interpretation of what it means to keep the Sabbath holy. He reminds them that David himself once ate the show-bread from the sanctuary on a Sabbath without incurring any guilt under the law. The reason for that, said Jesus, is because the purpose of Sabbath was to give us a day of rest and that, consequently, the Sabbath was made to bless humanity, and not the other way around. The purpose for which the law was instituted trumps the strict application of the law in all circumstances.

Depending on how you count them, there are about 613 laws in the Torah. So when the lawyer in today's reading asks Jesus what the highest law is, his answer is the same answer that Judaism has always given: Love God with everything you've got, and love your neighbor as yourself. (Rabbi Hillel, a Pharisee and a contemporary of Jesus, gave the same answer when asked this question, adding, "All the rest [of the Torah] is commentary.")

What this means is that these two laws, love God and love your neighbor, need to be the guiding principles of our lives and actions *in every moment of our lives*.

Although, loving God does not just mean holding a warm spot in your heart for Creator; nor does loving your neighbor mean being a milquetoast in the face of injustice or evil.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus often refers to scripture by saying the tagline of a longer passage. If I were to say, "If the shoe fits ..." I don't have to say the whole thing because everyone knows what comes next. Same thing with, "You can lead a horse to water ...". Probably the best example of this in Matthew comes in the 26th chapter where Judas complains about wasting the money which could have been spent on the poor on the very expensive oil poured on Jesus' head. Jesus replies, "The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me."

Some people take that to mean we don't have to worry about the poor. But when Jesus says, "you always have the poor with you," he is invoking a passage from Deuteronomy. The whole passage (from Deut. 15, if you want to look it up), which Judas certainly knew, is this: For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore . . . , You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land."

The same thing is going on in today's reading. When Jesus cites these two laws as the Greatest Commandments, he's giving the lawyer two citations to two longer passages. When Jesus tells him, "You must love your neighbor as yourself," he's citing a passage in the 19th chapter of Leviticus which says, "You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor (you don't have to be a milquetoast), but [you] shall not incur sin because of him. 'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against [your fellows], but you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

The same is true of the Greatest Commandment about loving God. Here, Jesus is citing a passage from the 6th chapter of Deuteronomy which says,

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

In other words, “loving the Lord your God,” is not just some warm fuzzy feeling that you have towards someone you go visit once a week on Sunday morning. Rather, we must allow our love for God to grow to be our deepest and all-consuming passion, pervading our minds in thought

and conversation, our hands in work and play, ALL our interactions with our children, our last thought before sleep, our first thought when we wake everything we do. That's what the first commandment asks of us, that we express the love of God, express our thankfulness from our hearts in every moment -- beginning with this one.

So the next time you hear the words, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'," remember what a deep and overarching commandment that is in its entirety. Love God in every moment of your life with everything you've got, and love your neighbor just as you love yourself.

Hear, O Israel!

