

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
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"Blue Laws"

"...as it is written, 'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'"
(Mark 7:6-7, NRSV)

How many of you know what I am talking about when I say "Sunday Blue Laws?" We don't hear a lot about them anymore, but in many states like Pennsylvania, North Carolina and Florida where the so-called "Bible Belt" is very strong, they are still very much in effect. They are the result of a rather strict interpretation of the fourth Commandment: "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy." Most of the "Blue Laws" were enacted late in the Nineteenth Century, during the "Victorian Period," and then amended in this century after Prohibition. They affect everything from liquor sales to transportation schedules. Over the years, several interesting stories have circulated about how this legislation got its "nickname," but what I remember most is the feeling of being "blue," or sad, because there was very little for a small child to "do" on Sundays, except, of course, go to church.

There was one other thing that we could do, and that was go to visit Grandma. Grandpa was there too, of course, but he was always glued to his chair beside the radio listening to Byron Nelson do the play-by-play of the Phillies game. "Harry, aren't you going to do anything else all day?" Grandma would say, Sunday after Sunday. "Nope!" He would answer. "Today is Sunday and there's a Phillies' double-header!" Grandpa had his own idea of Sunday Blue Laws! He did get up to come to the dinner table, however.

Whenever I would ask questions like "Why do we have to stay home on Sunday?" or, "Why don't we ever do anything?" I was always given the answer, "Because it's Sunday and that's what the Bible says we should do." It seemed that since God intended the Sabbath as a day of rest, then Sunday should be devoted exclusively to rest and worship. In fact, in nearby Lancaster County, some of our kin, the Amish, carried this to the extreme. They wouldn't even allow cooking on Sunday; all meals had to be prepared in advance. Children were allowed to play, but it was very restricted. Baseball wasn't even considered! It wasn't until I became a teenager and began to study the Bible in earnest that I learned about this strange doctrinal shift that we Christians had taken over from the Jews. It seems that the original "Sabbath" was a Saturday, and here we Christians were laying around doing nothing on a Sunday! It didn't make sense! Sunday was the day of resurrection; a day for celebration; a day for *doing* things! Saturday was the Sabbath, the seventh day, the day after creation, the day the Lord rested! Saturday was the end of the weekly cycle, the last day of the week, as it still is on most calendars! But typical of humans in general and Christians in particular, we had made a shift in our thinking and practice and then forgotten why. Then, too, our religiosity got in the way and we created things like "Blue Laws" to re-enforce our thinking and to restrict our behavior.

That is the kind of religiosity that provides the background for today's gospel reading. Because the religious leaders of Israel took God's laws with utmost seriousness, they had developed an extensive interpretation of the law, in

this case the Ten Commandments, to enable people to know how to apply it in daily life. They had enacted “Blue Laws” for daily living!

Now we must realize that all of this was probably very good advice for health and hygiene and indicates how seriously these people took their religious practices. Therefore, when Jesus’ disciples didn’t scrupulously observe these teachings, the Pharisees jumped on Jesus with all four appendages! “Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders but eat with defiled hands?” Why are you disregarding our “Blue Laws?”

Jesus cuts through all this superficial piety in his reply, *“Isaiah prophesied rightly about you hypocrites, as it is written, ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.’ You abandon,”* says Jesus, *“the commandment of God and hold to human tradition.”* (vs.6-8) Or in other words, your “Blue Laws” have gotten in the way of your relationship with God! You have interpreted God’s commandments and made the interpretation into “laws,” the following of which are no substitute for a right relationship with God. **Faithfulness to God is not measured by things like clean hands but in lives constantly renewed by the Holy Spirit!**

Unfortunately, this “Blue Law” mentality has carried over to our present time. Consider, for example, the matter of church organization, where many tend to make human tradition more determinative than their relationship to God and God’s Word. For example, could Roman Catholics exist without their “catholicity?” Could Greeks exist without their “orthodoxy?” Could Presbyterians exist without their “presbyters?” Could Baptists exist without their emphasis on “baptism?” Could we Episcopalians exist without our “episcopate,” our bishops? The interesting thing is that all of us use God’s “Word,” the Bible, to validate our own brand of “Blue Laws.”

We do this with all of our religious practice; the sacraments, the liturgy, the church calendar, committees and small groups. Ask yourself this question: “In my daily religious life, what are the “Blue Laws” that get in the way of my relationship with God, *and with other people?*” Now take it a step further: within the fellowship of God’s people known as Christ Church, what are the “Blue Laws” of acceptability? What in our church family allows a person to be accepted or makes a person unacceptable? Are our local rules of inclusion and exclusion compatible with the Biblical teaching of Jesus? Do they fit with his declaration that **it is not what we consume that defiles us, but rather what consumes us!** “Blue Laws” have a way of doing that!

In fact, all of our traditions have an insidious way of standing between us and the Savior. Religion, in the sense of devotion to forms and traditions, to ritual and patterns of piety, religion in this sense may make us feel good while insulating us against a real encounter with the Holy One and the call to repentance and faith, witness and service. My hunch is that *none* of our finely tuned doctrines does justice to the Biblical witness and that all the insights of our several traditions combined are inadequate to prescribe a pure relationship with God. “Blue Laws” just can’t do that!

In other words, loving God results in our wanting to live God’s way, but when we “mess up” and forget the rules, or break the rules, God is more concerned about *us* than about any rules, no matter how important they may be. This is the teaching of Jesus for today; it is also the *essence* of his life, death and resurrection. God loved the world so much that God didn’t send “Blue Laws”; instead God sent Jesus to show us how to love. Hopefully, we here at Christ

Church will continue to become more and more a Christ-centered family that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, continually seeks to share this love of God with one another and with our community, in spite of our “Blue Laws.”

Now if you still need a “blue law” to help you remember today’s lesson, then the “short and simple” of what Jesus said is this: “a pure heart is more important than clean hands!” You might, however, want to explain that a little differently to your children and grandchildren!