

Who's the Boss?

A sermon for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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Rules are not for me. My mischievous spirit won't be squashed by silly instructions, guidelines, directions, rule books, procedures, systems, policies, regulations, decrees, or conventions. I can't be kept in a box. I choose not to color within the lines. I'll even drink milk after its expiration date. I know that's edgy, but I'm a rebel and that's how I roll. I'd be correct in thinking there are a few rebels in this room. Unitarian Universalism encourages us to disrupt the status quo. The Catholic nuns at St. Mary's Parochial school hated this about me. I was the class clown and questioned everything. Take for instance the time in first grade Sister Donna Jean was teaching the ten commandments. As a class we were to recite the commandments over and over in unison. Bored, I began to add peanuts and beer after every commandment. Everyone around me began to break in fits of laughter. Sister Donna Jean laid her eyes on me. I knew I had been caught. When she asked me what I was saying to dishonor our Lord the veins were popping in her forehead. I remember like it was yesterday responding with Thou shall not have any other God before me with peanuts and beer. I was yanked from my seat and shoved into the hallway waiting for my punishment. The usual punishment was copying the Bible and Sister Donna Jean said she would go over it with a fine toothed comb to make sure every word was copied. I copied the Bible and at the end of each sheet of paper I wrote peanuts and beer. This led to a home visit by Sister Donna Jean. The lesson I learned from all of this was that rules, laws secular or religious aren't always right.

I want to take you back to October 2015. This was the year that Speaker of the House John Boehner resigned. Do you remember around this time that Pope Francis arrived in Washington and while sermonizing, Boehner, who was staged quite close to him, was overcome emotionally, emotion that couldn't be contained. He announced the next day that while he said his morning prayers he instantly decided to resign. Some believe Boehner's resignation followed intense pressure from his party for being too liberal and not moving in the right direction quickly enough to defund Planned Parenthood, which would have led us to a government shutdown. Boehner's resignation shut all of that down. I agree that Boehner had had it, but I also observed Boehner's epiphany during and after the Pope's visit. Had Boehner consulted his God, realizing he was a barrier to all that God's messenger on earth, the Pope, had sermonized about? Had Boehner been ultimately reminded of his God's laws preventing him from continuing with political business as usual and harming the masses? Yes, that is my hypothesis, and I think we may see this hypothesis play out as Boehner urged Congress to vote for fairness to all Americans. A change of heart. It's interesting that within this hypothesis we see a man surrender himself to the will of his God versus his free will and that of his party and any agenda.

Questions for us are what do we do with all of this, how do we understand choosing religious law over secular law? Or secular law over religious law? This is a real issue for us as our world becomes closer and closer together. How do we celebrate diversity in our country, the welcoming of refugees of a different religious variety and understand why religious law might

supersede the law of the land? This is a here and now question. It's not a matter of when it happens. It has happened. As global citizens we are now required to answer these questions as people who live in our communities, native or refugee, require us to understand their truth and the dilemma it might bring. The most public example is the story of County Clerk Kim Davis, who became the face of opposition to the Supreme Court's ruling legalizing same sex marriage. Davis refused to sign marriage licenses for same-sex couples, despite a federal court order, thus refusing to do what was expected of her as an elected county clerk based on her belief in the laws of her God superseding the law of the land. That won her five days in jail and death threats and other distressing treatment, as you might imagine. Let us note that she did what she did and endured persecution and prosecution to honor religious law over secular law. Believe it or not, it's hard to tell most days that the separation of church and state is foundational for our country and has lived within Unitarianism for generations. We must remember, though, that many countries traditionally have closer links between state and religion. Religious law is ethical and moral codes taught by religious traditions. I offer the historical interpretation of secular law offered by Oliver Wendell Holmes. He writes that "law is a magic mirror." He continues, "this abstraction called the law, wherein, as in a magic mirror, we see reflected, not only our lives, but the lives of all men that have been." I take Holmes metaphor to mean that law is a cultural artifact, a moral deposit of society. That is, he angles the mirror to reflect law in American history not the history of American law. We then understand that the interaction of law and society changes, and so we uncover the gray area about who the boss actually is -- which law do we honor? Both are influenced by culture and tradition.

Secular and religious law live within a gray area. Even the greatest minds in the highest courts struggle with these questions. As McEwan pointed out, it's not black and white. Secular law is not the law of morality taught by tradition, but a law that applies secular principles, and he tells us what is lawful is not always right. Again, what is lawful is not always right. I challenge all of us to hold that statement. Whether we agree with the separation of church and state and champion secular law or know deep in our bones the wishes and power of our personal God and follow our God's law, we will not always be right. The question we must ask ourselves is not, "Should secular law trump religious law or religious law trump secular law?" The question is, "Are our laws life-giving?" Do our laws have the ability to impart life and vitality? As Unitarian Universalists this is what we work for. This is the place we should occupy. It is what we believe, who we are, and our work is to move toward life sustaining and life giving beliefs and practices. We work to reverse the symptoms of a hurting world. Not unlike a patient with a debilitating disease. The patient works to restore health and their work through healing is life giving.

This is the way to travel out of the gray area that we've been talking about. That is, do we follow a legal code or our customs? You see, our work is to determine whether any law, religious or secular, is life sustaining and life giving. What makes a religious or secular law life giving? Law is life giving if it is a demonstration of justice and mercy. Religious laws that condemn, call for violence, tear apart communities and devalue are not life giving. Secular laws that place a greater divide between the haves and have nots, prevent anyone from living a full life, promote war among individuals, communities or countries are not life giving. We live in a time where both religious and secular law is breaking our society into pieces. Our answer to the question of who's the boss?, which is mightier? is that law, religious or secular that brings justice for all, compassion, and truth. I have no problem advising that we should denounce any law that asks us to do the opposite. What is law is not always right. As Unitarian Universalists we have the

responsibility and the opportunity to make it right. We work to protect religious liberty as freedom from discrimination against religious belief and worship, and denounce religious liberty as exemption from non-discriminatory laws that burden religiously motivated conduct. Freedom of religion is one thing. but using such freedom to justify hate and violence must never be allowed. A theocracy we can live without. But what about secular laws that promote hate, violence, and discrimination? Think of current immigration laws, criminal law that promotes inequality and division, laws that protect wage inequality.

Service is our law. We affirm that covenant written in 1864 by Unitarian Minister James Blake. Seeing ourselves as bound in covenant is an old practice among us. In 1630, John Winthrop, soon to become the first governor of Massachusetts, spoke to a soggy, stalwart band of fellow Puritans, our ancestors, sailing with high and pious hopes aboard the *Arabella* toward a new life in New England:

“Now the only way to avoid . . . shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God.... We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others’ necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.”

It was an extraordinary declaration of interdependence. Despite their stone-cold reputation, their caricatured intolerance, these were people who promised to bear each other’s burdens as their own, to subvert their separate, private interests, their “superfluities,” for the public good of all. Humbly, gently, patiently, they would serve a vision larger than any single eye could see; they would hold a larger hope. Those who heard John Winthrop speak would surely have grasped the metaphor of danger: they would have been afraid not only of foundering, literally, on New England’s rocky shore, but of failing in their errand to establish this commonwealth, their “city on a hill.” The only way to avoid shipwreck, spiritual or otherwise, was to “keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace” -- to make and keep a sacred covenant together.

Unlike many traditions where a specific scripture is the law, service to the common good is our highest calling. Knowing that our fates are intertwined and that when injustice is done to anyone, anywhere, injustice is done to all of us, everywhere, we work steadily towards righting the many injustices in the world. “We are what we do in the world.” We are lost without contributing to the world. The great injustice is not that people break laws or claim loyalty laws that tear down or destroy. The great injustice is that each person is not empowered to contribute to the lives of others. What makes us human is not that we are able to kill our enemies and to take whatever we can ravage from a destitute world. What makes us human is that we can shout danger and encouragement to one another; we can share surplus necessities and find better ways of doing things; and we can dance with one another, giving and receiving, following and leading. We are what we do for and with one another. Through service, may we find and empower wholeness. May we always reach for and hold up the magic mirror.

May it be so.