

## Life Rules

Our reading today from the Acts of the Apostles contains these words, “It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities...” What follows is a short list of prescriptions necessary to do “what is right.” As we ponder life in this newly forming Church, we see that it is common practice for the Apostles, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to discern what is required to be a member of the Christian community.

These “life rules” must be adapted to culture and age. The gentile communities, unaware of Jewish practice, need the Gospel interpreted to fit their understanding. Daily questions arise that require discernment as to what can be continued and what must be revised in accord with this new life in Christ. The basic struggle of these new communities was discovering how that which is secular fits with the divine. What keeps us focused on Christ and the gospel and what does not? What does the resurrection mean for daily living?

For us who are present day Christians, the questions remain the same. There are “life rules” that our Christian community must follow in order to be what it is called to be. We, as well, have to constantly discern what attitudes and behaviors must be followed if we believe that Jesus rose from the dead. Doing so can have a dramatic impact on how we live our lives.

Many people approach their faith with a premise that goes something like this: if I try to do the best I can, I am good with God. While there is some truth in this thinking, its simplicity misses the point of why we are Christians in the first place. We carry the idea that as long as we can get a foot into heaven, what happens between now and then is of little consequence. Why do more work or put in more effort than is necessary? After all, if we really mess up, we can go to confession, have our sins forgiven and get back on track... right? Unfortunately, the answer is “no.”

The early Church wrestled with these kinds of questions and we continue to do the same today. Think for a moment about a special relationship in your life...a spouse, child or close friend. What would that relationship be like if you only put in the bare minimum and focused exclusively on what you will gain from the relationship? Psychologists would tell us that the “special character and closeness” of the relationship would disappear and it would be headed for disaster. Who would want to invest in a relationship of minimalism and self gain? What good would ultimately come?

God is a God of relationship. Our relationship with God exists primarily because of his love. My response, or my spirituality, must be motivated by a sincere return of love. Anything other than this makes the relationship unhealthy just as it would in a human relationship. It is not about the reward of heaven, answering prayers, granting favors,

solving problems and creating miracles and cures. While some of these things may occur as a result of living out our love relationship with God, they cannot become our motivation for prayer, living the Christian life or believing in God in the first place.

Being in love with God means that we will do anything necessary to make that relationship grow and flourish. Once I embrace a relationship with God, which includes a relationship with Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and make a self donation of love then there is no other choice than to live the gospel completely. I then accept doing this not only because it is what God desires, but because it is “right” to do so. All that Jesus taught and did serves a single purpose: namely, to put us in right relationship with God, others and ourselves.

Now, having established this truth, it is our task to discern the necessities of our resurrection faith. What must change in our lives because we love God and have accepted baptism?

There is a new brand of atheism gaining popularity today. In short, it seeks to rid culture of religion because the effects of religion on culture have been, for the most part, destructive. They see religious minded people as justifying war and treating others badly. Religion is perceived as an act of brainwashing that lacks compassion. It divides rather than unifies. It is easy to dismiss such thinking simply because it is atheistic. But, are their perceptions all that untrue?

The problem, quite often, is that we live a “watered down” version of the gospel. We end up living a privatized version of Christianity, with little change in thinking or lifestyle. In doing so, religion either becomes reduced to relativism or becomes extremely legalistic; requiring constant defense and battle. However, if an individual, because of his or her profound love of God and knowledge of God’s love for them, chose to really live the teachings of Christ, would those same claims be true?

We need to constantly remind ourselves that our lives must be based not only on the Ten Commandments, but the Beatitudes as well. Jesus wasn’t fooling around when he demanded that his disciples forgive their enemies. He did not mince words when he asked them to love. He was quite serious when he told his disciples that suffering would come their way and that living as he taught would bring unpopularity and even death. He tried to prepare them for persecution and for being perceived as foolish by those who didn’t understand. Their mouths were always to carry words of peace and they were not to take up arms. They were asked to live simply and to consider each other’s needs. And, on more than one occasion he told them not to let their hearts be troubled or afraid.

This, in a nutshell, is the gospel message. If we take it seriously, it will have a tremendous impact on how we think, feel and live our lives. Generally, we are not Christian enough. Our behavior does not always reflect a love of God. We treat each other badly and often sacrifice innocent lives. We seek money and power, destroy our environment, develop land

for personal gain, exploit the poor and ask God to bless our wars. We promote capital punishment, refuse to moderate our sexuality and go to great lengths protect our own security; we abuse and neglect animals and do nothing to stop destructive cycles; we ignore our spiritual lives, celebrate the sacraments when convenient and disregard the voice of our church. What is worse is that we do all of these things and still feel that we are justified and in “right” relationship with God.

There are some true and focused Christians among us. Unfortunately, they are often seen as the “trouble makers.” They are found in voices of descent and speak out against injustice and abuse. They have the courage to speak against what is wrong and care little about the personal consequences of doing so. Perhaps during this time of resurrection joy, we can honestly confront ourselves and see how we measure up to the gospel. When we truly, out of love, embrace the gospel, then we can effectively preach the gospel and “if necessary, use words”.