

Running a Red Light

I had grandmother who was an adventurer. She headed to Nigeria in 1930 when she was three months pregnant with my mother. By the time she and my grandfather arrived at their destination she had traveled by freighter, train, foot, horse and finally floated across the last river in a bathtub. It was an arduous trip and by then she was close to delivering my mother. My grandmother was fearless. She got her first computer at 92 while living in a skilled nursing center and created her own website. She was plucky. But she was law-abiding to a T.

In 1974 the federal government passed a law reducing the maximum permissible speed limit to be 55 mph. Back then my grandmother would get on the freeway and move immediately over to the fast lane, never going over 55. Slowly, before the speed limit changed to 65 in 1987, drivers started pushing the edges of the speed limit past 55 and driving faster than the speed limit. But not my grandmother. She kept driving 55 in the fast lane because that was the law. Then she got pulled over by a CHP officer. He said, "Ma'am, do you know how fast you were going?" "Yes, I do officer." "I was going 55 and not a mile per hour faster." He said, "I know. That is so dangerous. If you are going to go that slow you need to take surface streets in the future."

That interaction shook my grandmother. She quit driving on the freeways. If she couldn't drive on the freeway and follow the laws of the land, she would quit driving on the freeways. That is the stock from which I come. Breaking the law is not something I want to do. A couple years ago I met some folks for lunch after worship at a restaurant across the street from the church. I was running late and so I crossed the street in the middle of the block. When I arrived at the restaurant someone had taken a photo of me jaywalking. He said, "I was wondering if you wanted to post this photo of you breaking the law on the church website." I was embarrassed. I don't cross in the middle of the block anymore because it is against the law.

I grew up with the message that one of the ways to be a good Christian was to be a law-abiding citizen. I don't think my parents ever said that. But I learned it from my grandmother's behavior. I learned it at school. I learned it when I would go to anti-war protests with my father. He always made sure that they were peaceful, law-abiding protests before he participated. Somehow citizenship and being a faithful disciple of the Jesus way got intermingled in my head and my upbringing.

Several years ago, when thousands of unaccompanied minors were arriving in the United States from Central America on tops of trains, law-abiding citizens of the US were angry. "How dare these children "sneak" into our country. They are breaking the law," they argued. They didn't ask what would make parents but their children on freight trains in Guatemala for an arduous unaccompanied journey north in which they may not survive. I remember seeing the photo of one angry, law-abiding citizen protesting near the border. She was wearing cross earrings, a shirt with an American flag on it and she held a sign that said, "Jesus would never break the law." It awoke a deep truth in me.

I thought to myself, “That woman and I have different Jesuses.” Jesus broke religious laws and, I would argue, Roman laws. When confronted by religious leaders for breaking the law of Sabbath he said, “Isn’t it lawful to do good on the Sabbath?” When the religious leaders came at Jesus because his disciples did not wash their hands before they ate, he was furious. He pointed out they broke the law all the time by not honoring their fathers and mothers when they told children they did not need to aid their parents financially if they gave that money to the temple instead. Jesus said, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles but what comes out of the mouth.” When given a coin and asked by the religious leaders if it was okay to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus said, “Give Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but give God what belongs to God.” And what did Jesus feel we owed to God? Everything. In the scripture that Doug read to us this morning from Matthew 23, Jesus is giving it to the Pharisees for focusing on the religious law of tithing but failing to uphold the larger truths of justice and mercy and faith. He tells them that they are worrying about the gnat while they swallow a camel.

Right now as people are marching in the streets, demanding that we right four hundred years of oppression against people of color, white Americans are struggling with the privileged message of their upbringing – that somehow being an American and being a follower of Jesus are the same thing...the message that right or wrong a law is not to be broken. We are straining at the gnat and swallowing the camel.

I marched in a Black Lives Matter protest here in La Verne several weeks ago. I saw many of our church family there. It was peaceful, multi-cultural march asking for a recognition of our nation’s sin and demanding change. At one point I saw a lone resident of La Verne standing at the side of the march. He was not participating in the march. He held a sign that said, “Sympathy – Yes. Mayhem – No.” It appeared that in his mind the right to march in the street to demand we be a better America bordered on mayhem. I was sad when I saw that sign.

The mayhem I am witnessing is an America that treats some of its citizens as “less than”...as expendable. The mayhem I am witnessing is an America that counters the call for rectifying this sin with the chant “All lives matter.” The mayhem I am witnessing is the valuing of property over the lives of people. The mayhem I am witnessing is an America that defends and creates laws that destroy the lives of its citizens of color. Much of this mayhem happening in the US is legal.

This mayhem isn’t new. It just changes its name from slavery to Jim Crow to redlining to voter suppression to mass incarceration. We just change the law to a new way to oppress. Friends, being a law-abiding citizen and a Christian are not the same thing.

In Martin Luther King Jr.’s book Trumpet of Conscience he responds to the criticism that Black Americans were breaking the law. He writes:

There is nothing wrong with a traffic law which says you have to stop for a red light. But when a fire is raging, the fire truck goes right through that red light, and normal traffic had better get out of its way. Or, when a man is bleeding to death, the ambulance goes through those red lights at top speed. There is a fire raging

now for the Negroes and the poor of this society...Disinherited people all over the world are bleeding to death from deep social and economic wounds. They need brigades of ambulance drivers who will have to ignore the red lights of the present system until the emergency is solved.

We have some red lights to run. We have to quite focusing on the gnat and swallowing the camel. We have to follow God's will over the laws of the land. This isn't new to the Church of the Brethren. It is part of our heritage...our ethos...our teaching. We call it nonconformity and it is based on the scripture from Romans 12, verse 2:

Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to discern what is the good, pleasing and perfect will of God.

Historically the Brethren have been nonconformists to the ways of the world. They dressed differently, refused to participate in the military, and lived as simply as possible. They heard the call to follow the will of God over the demands of the State. The Church of the Brethren began with eight law breakers who baptized each other as adults in the Eder River in Germany in 1708...an illegal act that sparked several years of persecution for them and led to their decision to come to America. Since our beginning, Brethren men have refused to uphold the laws of their lands that dictated they must go to war and they have paid the penalty. Some Brethren today refuse to pay any taxes they know will go to help the war machine or to follow the law to sign up with Selective Service at the age of 18. Many Church of the Brethren congregations joined the Sanctuary Movement in the Eighties to provide safe haven for Central American refugees. The La Verne Church of the Brethren was one of those congregations.

Church of the Brethren members have always known that there were laws worth breaking in order to do what is the good, pleasing and perfect will of God. Breaking the law is not the question. The question is: Who is part of our community? For whom are we willing to break the law?

In the past, we have answered that question with, "Our community is the world. We will not join the military or participate in any laws that kill God's children...regardless of whether they have been deemed unworthy." We are who we are today because of our Brethren ancestors who ran some red lights and focused on the camel instead of straining at the gnat. We have a rich heritage of justice and peace because of those who counted the cost of following the call of Christ to give unto God that which belongs to God. We owe a debt of gratitude to the generations of courageous people who went before us, putting their lives and reputations on the line for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our spiritual ancestors were courageous nonconformists. They followed the One who threw the moneychangers out of the temple and spoke truth at the cost of his life. They followed him by counting the cost of faith. They followed him by choosing death or imprisonment over killing others. They followed him by clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, feeding the hungry, welcoming the marginalized. They followed him by not letting the Caesar of their time be in charge of their decisions of how they practiced their

faith. They followed him by keeping their Bibles and their hearts and their minds open wide. They followed him to some of the most difficult places. They were people of courage and they handed us this legacy and we have some big shoes to step into. We need to join the brigade of ambulance drivers and firetruck drivers, the long line of Brethren saints, and the footsteps of Jesus. We need to keep our eyes and our lives in direct focus with Christ's call to not neglect the weightier matters of justice and mercy and faithfulness. We can't let anyone turn us around from following Jesus. We have to keep on walking, keep on singing, keep on dismantling the deep social, economic and racial injustices of our time and we may have to run some red lights in the process. Amen