

SHELTER FROM THE STORM

We all know rules and regulations are needed. For the most part, we understand their value and we appreciate them.

There are all kinds of rules and all sort of reasons for having rules. There are etiquette and decorum rules to simplify social interactions and to avoid embarrassments.

There are community/corporate legal rules to secure order, security and predictability. The criminal code and traffic regulations are but two examples.

We may not always “enjoy” the speed limit, but we realize and respect the need for the limits.

There are even personal individual rules that guide us and ...rationalize our behaviour. In many situations, we abide by an internal code – our own value system.

Most prisoners view themselves as innocent.... based on their own code and perspective.

We humans need to believe that we are right / that we are good.

And,... of course, there are moral and religious rules....which we try to live bybecause of their “accepted” importance,.... and because we don’t want to sin.

Overall, rules / laws provide a feeling of safety and stability. They grant us a sense of shelter from the storms uncertainty, malevolence and calamity.

And,.....when we abide by the rules, they grant a sense of well-being.

They affirm that we are doing good; that we are good.

Rules can make us feel good about ourselves..... and safe.

Even though, toddlers seem focussed on breaking the rules, they are really measuring their limits–the walls that form their shelter. And, when they follow the rules, they feel the assurance that they are good..... and safe.

We adults are not that much different, except that our shelter is bigger and our rules are more numerous and complex.

However, the weird thing about rules is that they change.

We’d like them to be durable and reliable, yet they vary in different situations and cultures, and they change with the times, too.

And, that instability can make us a little uneasy, even skeptical about the strength of our shelter from the threatening storms outside.

This is especially true with religious and moral laws. We really want laws that govern sins to be certain and permanent.

Yet, attitudes / perceptions change,....and, some stout rules are merely cultural.

In certain cultures it is considered wrong to show the bottom of your feet. In Egypt, if you are invited for supper at 6:00 pm, it is very rude if you show up before 6:30, and 7:00 is even better.

Those “customs” / local legal flavours are easily understood, ... yet what about really getting a grasp of what is right and wrong.....because sometimes following the law isn't necessarily good?

A timber company with the proper permit has the legal right to clear cut a forest, but does that make it okay?

Having the “right” doesn't necessarily make something right.

By and large, Wall street and investment bankers were abiding by the laws when they lead the US into near financial collapse.

Yet, were they morally right?

We tend to look to religion for moral direction / to set our moral compass, yet.... even in the realm of church our rules and laws are cultural and change over time.

In my tradition of origin, a church could only receive money by direct donation. Until I became Mennonite, I believed it was wrong for churches to do fund raisers such as auction sales.

Different cultures have different rules, and attitudes change over time, too.

My parents would be shocked by the absence of many of the rules they held dear. Their generation had a lot of behavioural restrictions, and breaking those expectations was considered sinful.

In those days, a lot of energy and devotion was given to obedience and compliance,..... and they felt good about being under “that shelter”, too.

It was important for them to declare and label what was right and what was wrong, but *aside from making them feel better, many of those rules, I believe, were not really helpful...*because they shoved people outside.

When I went to summer camp as a teenager, boys and girls were not allowed to dance, nor were we allowed to swim in the pool at the same time.

So,..... we had to sneak away for such activities.

The rules pushed innocent teenage behaviour outside of the church, and therefore those actions were void of affirming and positive influences.

Demanding outward behaviour to be “right” can push people out into the storm....even to the wrong.

Too often, our religious rules are formed to fit our “current” patterns / to affirm who we are by declaring our life choices and values as good.

And, when we abide by those rules..... we feel safe and secure—content.

The Pharisees of Jesus time followed such rules—rules that suited them, but excluded those who were different.

When rules are not fair and just, they can be condescending, cruel and destructive, and even encourage deceit and hypocrisy with their demand for behavioural conformity.

Instead of creating an inviting shelter of safety and well-being, rules can be used to sent people away, out into the storm of uncertainty, malevolence and calamity..... or worse.

Laws can be abused in order to judge and condemn people, and that invites the storm in. Judging devalues and divides. The enforcers of the law become arrogant, mean and even fearful.... because they do not know when things will turn on them.

And, the condemned are filled with shame, rejection, separation and fear.

The indwelling tempest is the worst kind of storm for wrecking havoc on the soul.

YET,..... if we should be suspicious of “religious” rules,.... how are we to know right from wrong? What is morally correct? How are we to discern what is sin? Is everything merely relative / subjective,.... and if so, how can we feel safe and secure?

From time to time, I’m asked, “Will you preach about sin and what is right and wrong?”

The simple reply is: **sin is whatever separates us from God.**

Yet, we need some guidance in discerning what causes the “separation.”

Today’s passages grants us some clarity about understanding sin and distinguishing between right and wrong.

Chapter eleven from Isaiah begins with words of hope: all is not lost like a dead stump. A branch will come to life,... and we understand that branch to be the Messiah.

This person will be a pure, wise and understanding representative of God.

He will not evaluate the outward behaviours. He will not be fooled by pious whitewash.

This being with the “Spirit of Yahweh” will adjudicate beyond what is seen and heard.

To be sure, this Messiah was perceived to be a powerful judge and enforcer.

Nevertheless, we are told what is the criteria for evaluation.

Balance and harmony is the measure for judging what is good and what is bad. Actions and passions should nurture and contribute to wholeness.

There will be equality for the meek and the poor. The standard is / the goal is harmony and balance, in other words: wholeness.

The wolf will live with the lamb. Those who keep the powerless weak will cease doing that.

Avenue H will be a safe place to live.

Equality, respect and true justice is the measure.

The bear and cow will share the same resources together.

Power and strength will not determine benefits and lifestyle.

And, the innocent—the child will not be exploited. The helpless will not live in fear. The snakes will not take advantage of a child’s mistake of putting a hand into the snakes lair.

If we want to discern what is right or wrong, then consider those images presented.
Do our rules / do our actions strive for equality, balance and harmony, in other words wholeness? Do they nurture and guide us in that pursuit?

Pauls presents the same standard in Romans 15, and that is to live in harmony / in balance and wholeness with each other.

Therefore, we must ask ourselves, if we want to understand justice and right from wrong:
Do our lives / attitudes and our rules and laws strive to bring balance and wholeness?

Are we living in balance and harmony with God's creation..... or are we taking more than we are giving back?

Are we striving to uplift the weak and the wounded? Are we seeking equality and healing.... or are we causing more pain and imbalance.

Wrong, according to the Spirit of Yahweh, is what destroys / what weakens others / whatever brings discord and pain... and that includes supporting systems that retain the imbalance,..... and judging others is also divisive and counter to harmony.
We are not to the judging. Justice is the pursuit of wholeness.

If we use the measure presented in Isaiah, then,... I dare say, we all have some adjustments to make in our lives.

John the Baptist's message is just that: a call to repentance.

Repentance is more than confession and the desire for mercy and forgiveness.
Repentance also means a change of direction. Our emotions are involved, but so also is our will.
Repentance requires that we choose and LIVE a new path / a new way.

As John was baptising those who chose to repent, a group of Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptised, too.

I suppose they thought it was the "in thing" / the correct thing to do.

Apparently, they didn't grasp the "repent" part. They didn't demonstrate any fruits / actions that showed they had changed from their old ways, and so most interestingly, John called them a group of snakes.

Snakes represent what is sneaky, deceptive and what preys upon the weak and powerless. John's declaration was an invitation to repent.

On the surface, the Pharisees and Sadducees had rules and expectations that made sense and seemed fair..... to them, yet their system was not bringing about wholeness, equality and harmony.

Consider if life was a game of basketball.

Generally, the rules of basketball seem pretty fair and reasonable.

However, if you want to do well, if you want to succeed or even have a chance of surviving in the game, then you'd better be a man and at least over six feet tall.

If you are short or weak, and want to play a game of chess, then.... well, you're out of luck.

The rules of the game perpetuates the current standard of tall and strong.

Many of our rules in our culture and in our religion do the same thing.

They reinforce / defend those in power and those who are abiding by the rules..... because they make the rules.

For example, a bank will give a better interest rate if you have a million dollars to invest, compared to ten dollars.

In contrast, doing what is right is seeking balance and harmony, which means equality, which means uplifting the weak and the poor,.... and that likely means,..... if we are the bear, and I fear we may be just that,..... eating humble grass with the cow.

Are we striving to live in unity with nature..... or subsidising polluting and exploitative industries?

Are we living to bring balance with each other, or merely glad we live in a safe community protected by police that follow our rules?

Are we struggling with moral issues, yet not grasping wholeness and harmony?

Does everyone in our church have an equal voice, regardless of income or tenure?

How are we treating our enemies, the poor and weak?

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Perhaps, John the Baptist is calling out to you and me?

> One aspect John didn't quite understand was the nature of the Messiah –the true Spirit of Yahweh.

John assumes that the Messiah's power to affect change was from the fear of his pending judgment, but that was not the case.

Instead of enhancing fear, God sends us love in the form of a baby.

God gives part of self–nurturing love–to heal and to save / to bring wholeness with God and creation.

That is our model. That is our Messiah.....humble love,... that truly changes the heart..... and maybe even the world,..... some day.

Our God is a God of love and gives us Jesus in love, as John 3:16 points out; however, we should also be familiar with verse 17, which states, "God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world may be saved."

Our true and trustworthy shelter from the storms of life is made of grace and love.
Grace and love is what brings healing, restoration, wholeness and hope.

All rules and laws fall short and mere facades, without grace and love.

Understood clearly through Jesus the Messiah, God's salvation for the world and for us is the restoration of harmony and wholeness, and there, with God, in that pursuit, we will find the safety and security we so desperately seek.

And to those who are the victims of judgment and condemnation / who are being tormented with a storm within of fear, rejection and shame?

God comes to you first, to bring healing and restoration.

You are loved by God, and so with confidence enhance the harmony and wholeness.
God is with the weak and the broken. God's way builds shelters.
God is with the broken.

Right or wrong... all depends on where we are and for what we are living.