**Luke 6:43-49 Synod 2015**

The passage we’ve just heard from Luke is part of a larger discourse which we know as the Sermon on the Plain – or Sermon on the Mount, depending on whether you believe there was one such discourse, or two. One commentator I’ve read said it was probably a single sermon given on a plateau halfway down a mountain. That works for me.

Whatever we might believe about that, the teaching in both the discourse in Matthew and in Luke is essentially the same. In it, Jesus is being revolutionary. He is rewriting the rules from the perspective of love.

People respond differently to rules, don’t they?

Some of us need them. They give life definition and boundaries and a sense of security. As young parents, Jay & I went along to a parenting course. We were told that to have well-behaved young children, we needed to put definite boundaries in place to make them feel secure and loved. (It worked to a point – but then they turned into teenagers.)

Others can find rules frustrating and oppressive. Rules will sometimes encourage us to look for loopholes. We want to know the fine print so we can find ways to beat the system. I suspect this was partly behind the question of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19. Do you remember that story? When he asked Jesus what good thing he had to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus said, “Obey the commandments,” The young man’s response was, “Which ones?” Definitely looking for an out.

When I’d just moved into a rural parish some years ago, I asked a parishioner what the speed limit was along a certain stretch of road. I was told, “It’s 100, but you can get away with 110 before they’ll book you.” Good to know.

It’s a bit like the man who was told to watch his drinking. From then on, he would only drink in bars with mirrors.

The religious climate of Jesus’ day was oppressive. As Jewish history progressed, the Pharisees had managed to introduce, and pack around the heart of the law, 248 additional commandments and 365 prohibitions. (No wonder the rich young ruler asked which ones…) The emphasis on keeping the rules was so strong, that the heart of the law - love for God and for one’s neighbour - had been totally eclipsed.

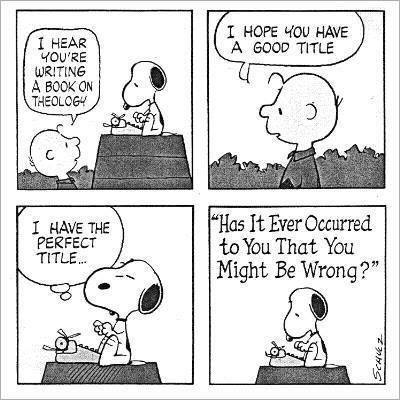
In Mark chapter 7 Jesus says, "Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written: "'These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain; their teachings are merely human rules.' You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions." (v6-8)

We may think that the problem Jesus had with the Pharisees was unique to his day. But of course it was not. Where do our religious rules come from? Essentially, they are born of a particular theological perspective. For instance, in our day, churches in the Baptist tradition have a rule that they will not baptise infants. It comes from their belief that infant baptism is not Scriptural. The Salvation Army observes different rules. They do not observe baptism at all – nor do they have Holy Communion in their worship meetings. A rule of the Roman Catholic Church is that it will not allow its priests to marry. And so it goes.

The reason we have so many Christian denominations is because rules, born of firmly held theological perspectives, must not be broken; so when the rules are challenged, and the challenge is not resolved, a schism or split results – which is tragic.

Schisms go way back in the history of the Christian Church. Our three major traditions – Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant, are all a result of an inability to compromise around firmly held theological beliefs and the rules that ensue.

One of my favourite Charlie Brown cartoons features Snoopy the dog sitting on his kennel roof, tapping away at his typewriter. Charlie Brown comes along and says, “I hear you’re writing a book on theology.” Snoopy looks up and Charlie Brown continues, “I hope you have a good title!” Snoopy looks smug and says, “I have the perfect title. It’s this: ‘Has it ever occurred to you that you might be wrong?’”



Charles Schultz, I suspect, knew a few theologians.

The focus of today’s reading in Luke is a life that reflects the heart of God and his precepts, rather than a life that is bound by human rules.

In this passage, we have two simple illustrations which focus on the heart. The first is about the good tree which cannot bear bad fruit, and the bad tree which cannot bear good fruit, and the second is about the heart being a treasure store, producing either good or evil, depending on what is in that store.

We need to read these verses in the context of the verses that precede them, to fully grasp their meaning. Jesus has just been teaching the people what true obedience to God looks like.

He told the people:

Treat others the way you’d like to be treated.

Love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.

Be merciful; do not judge; do not condemn; forgive; give generously

And he added that if they acted in this way, they would experience the same from God.

This was not what the people were used to hearing. These rules put the heart of God before the letter of the law. Jesus was saying that it was far more important to honour God by caring for others than it was to observe the hundreds of rules and prohibitions contained in their religion.

Then Jesus got stuck into the Pharisees. He totally condemned their hypocrisy, seeing it as evil. He called them ‘blind guides’, and warned them that both they and their followers would fall into the pit. (6:39); he accused them of being pedantic about other people’s disobedience to the law – which he called the spec in a person’s eye - yet were oblivious to the log in their own, the log being their ignorance of the heart of God’s law (6:41)

Then we have these two illustrations. Jesus pulls no punches. When he says that a good tree does not bear bad fruit, and a bad tree does not bear good fruit; and when he says that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks, he is saying that the hearts of the Pharisees are bad. Their fruit is bad, so the tree is bad. Their words are evil, so their hearts are evil.

If their hearts were right before God, and they were walking with him, then they would be bearing good fruit – the fruit he had just been teaching about: they would be showing love, mercy, goodness, generosity and forgiveness; neither would they judge or condemn.

Inherent in these two illustrations is the importance of a heart that is right with God; a heart that puts him first before all others; a heart that, because it is right with him, overflows with love and generosity towards others. Also inherent in this section is the truth that good fruit is simply the consequence of a good heart. Good fruit isn’t the result of struggle and dogged determination to do the right thing. It is simply an outcome; the brimming over of a heart abundant with love for God.

I wonder what church history might have looked like if, in times of conflict, the church’s leaders bore more of this good fruit, - the love, the mercy, the generosity, the forgiveness, the acceptance - rather than the fruit of judgement, condemnation and all the other bad fruit the Pharisees exhibited.

Now perhaps some church historians may bristle, and say, “Hey – it’s not that simple. The schisms in the early church were worked through deeply and prayerfully, and the separation was considered the best way forward at the time.”

That may be so. But it doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t continue to strive, in the power of the Spirit, to exemplify the standards Jesus sets before us. His challenge couldn’t be clearer: “Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and not do as I tell you?”

If we give up and give in; if we take refuge in the fact that we are fallen human beings living in a fallen world, then our fate is spelled out in the next part of the reading. Let me read it to you again. Jesus says:

“I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them.

That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house."

Such a simple parable – yet it speaks volumes. When our hearts are right with God, when Jesus Christ is our foundation, when we are in tune with him and act on his teaching – we are on solid ground. We, as individuals, and we, as Christ’s church on earth, cannot be shaken.

But if we are not prepared to take Jesus’ teaching to heart and act on it, then we crumble.

Part of what we will do this Synod is look at the controversial issue of same sex marriage. As with so many controversies before this one, there is the potential in this issue to drive a wedge between Jesus’ followers who, in all good conscience, hold differing views.

Jesus has given us our mandate. If we call him Lord, we are to do as he says. He says that we are to act with love, mercy, goodness, generosity, forgiveness and acceptance.

There is a natural tendency for us – as highlighted in the Charlie Brown cartoon – to believe that we are correct in the way we look at a particular issue. And we hold fast to the rules that surround our theological perspective. That is human nature.

Let me close with a quote from “The Preacher’s Commentary”, edited by Lloyd Ogilvie:

“An emphasis on knowing and keeping rules can sometimes result in the exclusion of others. The religious leaders of Jesus day felt it was their God-given duty to exclude law breakers from their midst, and Jesus came under their condemnation. Jesus refused to exclude people on the basis of whether or not they kept the rules. He hung out with tax collectors and sinners, the social and political outcasts.” The writer then quotes Edwin Markham's poem:

“They drew a circle that shut me out,  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win,  
We drew a circle that took them in.”

Let’s pray…

Father, thank you for the challenge and encouragement of this passage. By your spirit, may we take your words to heart, and allow them to inform our thinking, our discussion and our interactions this Synod. May we know your guidance and blessing in all we undertake, through Christ our Lord. Amen.