

Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time – A

A family I know has a four-year old daughter. She is very inquisitive. She wants to know about everything: How things work, why people do things.

She especially wants to know about rules, and how far they go.

When her parents told her that she could ride her tricycle only in their driveway, she wanted to know exactly what that meant.

Could the front wheel touch the street when she turned around? What about her shadow? If her shadow went into the street, was that okay, or would she be disobeying?

It would have done her mother no good to say to her something like we heard Sirach say in the first reading:

“If you choose, you can obey and it will save you.” That idea was the opposite of what the little girl intended: to get away with all she could, to test the rule to its very limits.

For her the rule was nothing more than an authoritarian limitation on her freedom. She couldn't see that her parents were acting in her best interest, trying to keep her from harm.

Our attitude towards rules and the law depends on the rationale we see for them and on our feelings for those who have formulated them.

One level of obedience, like the four-year old tricycle rider's, is conformity to avoid punishment. The only reason she sees for following her parents' rule is that, if she follows it, she will not get into trouble.

Who knows what she will do if her parents are in the back yard and she knows they cannot see her?

In that sort of situation, the lawgiver or rule maker has to make sure that the punishment for breaking the rule is strong enough to keep the person from doing it.

But what we hear in today's readings takes a much different approach.

Sirach and other wisdom writers like him are convinced that obedience to God's law makes the quality of our lives better.

Scripture tells us that God's law is like a lamp to our feet, showing us the way to fullness of life.

It is more like a revelation and a gift than it is a demand.

Jesus looks at the law as something that can shed light on our motivations. The law against killing can be used to bring to light what lies at the root of that kind of action, anger.

And when the root is exposed, we can see all the other actions it leads to—

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actions that also can keep us from the happiness God wants for us.

When Jesus talks about relationships between the sexes, he recognizes that the law is not just about the obvious sins like adultery, but also about what lies at the root of such sins: lust, for example. Lust keeps a person from growing just as surely as adultery does.

The number of people who confess to viewing porn is evidence enough of that. And they become so fixated on it, that they lose sight of what else is going on in their lives.

Jesus would have us avoid all the things that keep us from the kingdom of God, whether they are large or small, serious or trivial.

When it comes to divorce Jesus tells his audience that if you put someone in an impossible situation, you are responsible for what happens as a result. That's what divorce in his day did to women, who were at the mercy of their husbands' decision-making.

That way of thinking applies to other areas of life beyond family affairs: former soldiers with PTSD or inner city children stuck in failing schools can have very little influence on what happens to them when they are put into difficult situations

Hearing Jesus speak to us today can lead us to the question of how much responsibility we have for these very serious problems.

Jesus is not giving us a new law in his Sermon on the Mount. He is using the law of Moses to guide us into a life full of blessing.

That life will escape us if all we can think about is what we can get away with.

It will unfold for us if we take Jesus' guidance to heart and look for the root of sin in our own lives, and attend to it. Then our actions will fall into line, and we will know true freedom, freedom from sin and freedom for God.