

Pentecost 2 (Proper 4) June 3, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church Freeland WA Nigel Taber-Hamilton Deuteronomy 5:12-15, Psalm 81:1-10, 2 Corinthians 4:5-12 Mark 2:23-3:6

Today's science lesson! Everything is relative (Einstein). While everything is relative, it is randomly relative (Heisenberg). In the universe of things, those are two of the most basic theories about how the world works.....relatively speaking(!). To understand how something works, you have to see it in relation to other things around it.

That's a transferable truth. To understand how humans work, exist, function, you have to see us in relation to our world and other people around us. Context matters.

That's part one of today's gospel. Jesus and the Pharisees. Most of the time, the gospels aren't very generous to Pharisees, even though they were written after the greatest Pharisee of all – St. Paul. It would be shocking if they'd never heard of Paul, after all – the Christian world in their time was minute.

There are positive images of Pharisees in the New Testament. Other than Paul, there's Nicodemus, and several who aren't named but with whom Jesus clearly has not simply cordial but close relationships. That story Jesus tells about taking the lowest seat so you can be asked up higher is, firstly at a meal in a Pharisee's house, but, secondly, one held in his honor. He was likely the one who, on entering the house, took that honored seat, and then realized that wasn't a very humble thing to do, and so told the aphorism on himself. And, likely, everyone laughed!

Mellow Pharisees!?! Sure! And the reason, quite possibly, is the sort of Pharisee they were. You probably didn't know there were two different sorts of Pharisee, did you?! It all goes back to two great Pharisees in the century before Jesus: Rabbi Hillel – after whom most of the Jewish Centers at universities and colleges are named, and Rabbi Shammai - whom likely you've never heard of!

These two rabbis, and their followers, engaged in fierce debates over the Law of Moses. If I was to sum up the differences (which is another way of saying that what I'm going to say is grossly oversimplified!) I'd say this: Rabbi Shammai and his followers were the stricter, the narrower the more inflexible, while Rabbi Hillel and his followers were more flexible and open, gentle and conciliatory.

Jesus literally could have been a Pharisee. If he wasn't literally a Pharisee, he was spiritually one, and clearly of the school of Rabbi Hillel – some of what Jesus is quoted as saying is identical with Rabbi Hillel's sayings. And more generally, both had mystical and prophetic moments and both were simultaneously lovers of and wrestlers with God

Today's gospel presents us with a classic argument between these two Jewish schools of Hillel and Shammai; one side – that from Jesus (reflecting the Hillelite perspective) – is flexible and open; the other (of Shammai), not so much!

Irrespective of the content I think it's clear that in understanding the context of this story we're

given a salutary reminder that the more things change, the more they stay the same!

So what are the takeaways?

First, clashing values are a characteristic of human community across time and cultures, they're not restricted to one time and one place. Of course, it would be convenient for all of us if they were restricted that way! Whatever perspective you take between the Hillelites and Shammaites, if the differences were restricted to the time before Jesus, until the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., then we wouldn't have to wonder not only which side we find ourselves on, but also how narrow and bigoted we'd be if we actually chose sides!!

Jesus' model wasn't to condemn those who had a different perspective but to engage them. That's a pretty good model for us today.

Second, internecine family disputes are just the worst! On the whole, there were sharp differences between Pharisees and Saducees, but the internal differences within the Pharisaic community were so much more personal, and, I think, bitter. Isn't that true today of our nation? We share (I hope!) a common commitment to the Republic and the values that underpin it as elucidated in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, yet the divide today within our nation is harsh and bitter.

In religious terms there are some pretty stark divisions, too – and I'm thinking now only of the Christian community. The death penalty, family planning, gun control – how do we Christians engage each other, let alone offer a common vision based on what Jesus actually said and did?

Jesus' model was to speak first about peace, and offer that value as the foundation for individual, interpersonal and communal engagement. That's a pretty good model for us today.

Another takeaway is about our orientation to law. The Law, according to Jesus and the Hillelite Pharisees was not the ultimate arbiter for decision-making. Rather, in addition to the law, the use of common sense based on thoughtful, relational human values was, for them and for him, a central part of the equation. Jesus tells these questioners that generosity and compassion are central; he raised them up as core value that wasn't just equal to the law, but overruled it.

Can't you hear in our contemporary political debates the struggle to find a middle way between heartless legalism and lawless flexibility? A lot of the debate around last year's tax reform law, and the repeal of part of the Affordable Care Act were debates about law and compassion and which should take precedence? Should one perspective be imposed, or should a middle way be negotiated?

Jesus' model was to base any form of judgment about behavior on more than law. His model included applying what he understood to be a core value of God – compassion and generosity – to modify or even overrule law. He wasn't saying “abandon law,” but “place other values along side it and use all of them to reach a compassionate solution. That's a pretty good model for us today.

Where's the danger here? An overly strict, almost obsessive focus on law, that doesn't focus on how it serves the people, is the pathway toward a dangerous authoritarianism. That happened with the Hillelites and Shammai-ites. The latter allied themselves with the zealots against Rome. Then, in a meeting with the Hillelites, the Shammai-ites killed most of them, and forced the remaining Hillelites – at sword point – to sign something called the “18 Articles”. What followed was a foolish war against Rome, and the near destruction of Judaism. Jews view the brief ascendancy of Shammaitism as a dark time for Judaism. Ultimately the Hillelites were restored, and Hillelite Judaism became Rabbinic Judaism, which is what Judaism is today.

Of course Sabbath-keeping – Law – is important, but – like everything that's organizationally structural – its importance is conditional; it should always reflect our ultimate loyalty to God's vision being worked out in time and space. For Jesus' listeners, this moment was a holy moment; it can be for us, too. What's more important, after all? To adhere to human law, or respond to God's compassionate grace. Sometimes that lead us to go against the traditions and mores of our culture and congregation. The invitation of today's Gospel is for us to remember that difference and always – always – to choose God's way.