

Epiphany 6, February 12, 2017 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Freeland. Nigel Taber-Hamilton  
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37

Who here has ever tried to put together anything that said on the outside of the box "some assembly required?" Do you follow the instruction manual every time? For most guys, putting something together without reading the instructions is a challenge worthy of accepting!

Instructions! Why is it that so many of us think we know better?! Is it pride? "I'm smart - I don't need instructions?!" Maybe its that we simply make the assumption that it *can't be* that difficult: if you can open the box, you can put it together!

Why is it, then, that we all know the aphorism: "when all else fails, read the instructions!?" I wonder, if relationships came with an instruction manual would people read it? If creating and maintaining community came with a manual, would people read it?

Most of the time we'd be better off starting with the instructions. But we often don't do that – in fact sometimes we don't even know there are instruction manuals.

Well, guess what?! For people of faith, there *are* manuals for relationships and community building! They're called the Old and the New Testaments!

Lets start with the Old Testament, and the first five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. Collectively they're called what? "The Pentateuch," or more often "The Law of Moses," which is more accurately translated as "The Teaching of Moses." Here's the manual, a "rule of life," directions for how to live a holy and ethical life.

Today's gospel – from Matthew – is part of what's called "The Sermon on the Mount" (Luke has one that's often called "The Sermon on the Plain"). Matthew thought of Jesus as the Second Moses, so what do you suppose he wanted his readers to think when he gathered together all these teachings of Jesus into a collection.....like the one gathered from Moses teachings? For Matthew, this is the Second Law, the "Second Teaching," a rule of life for Jesus' followers. Here, according to Matthew, is an instruction manual for how you and I should live a holy and ethical life.

Jesus was, of course, Jewish. According to Matthew, Jesus was *very* Jewish – more Jewish than Mark or Luke or John thought of him. If Jesus is the Second Moses, then his teaching can't be the same as the First Moses – and it isn't; but it can't be radically different from it either. It's in Matthew's gospel that we see that most clearly.

"You have heard it said in ancient times," Matthew records Jesus as saying. In other words, "The Teaching of Moses said X." But Matthew doesn't see Jesus dismissing these teachings, he doesn't hear Jesus saying "but I say not X but Y." Matthew hears Jesus *refining* the Teachings: "not X but X squared." It's not enough to not kill someone literally; now you're called *not* to engage in character assassination, or *ad hominem* attacks. Now you can't kill a person's spirit, murder their self-worth.

The teaching around adultery and divorce follow a similar pattern with an added twist. In first Century Israel men had much more power – and many more rights – than women. Men could much more easily dodge the intent of the Law, the Teachings, by adhering to the letter of the Law, of the Teachings. Here, today, we see Jesus taking a teaching of Moses that – when interpreted literally – disadvantaged women and said “this applies to men and women equally” – or, to put it another way, women have the same rights as men when it comes to human relationships....or perhaps more importantly, women have the same responsibilities as men when it comes to human relationships.

So this is an expanded rule of life for formerly Jewish people, a rule of life for a new community that encouraged following the spirit rather than the letter of the law, the teachings – a rule of life that in no way disparaged the one offered by Moses but rather challenged those who mis-used it for their own selfish purposes.

That’s what a genuine rule of life is, after all – if it’s a selfless living rule: something that’s intended to offer the sort of support and guidance that enables individuals and communities – us – to live more wholesome, fruitful, joyful, just, and ethical lives. It’s the dead rules of life – or perhaps the death-dealing rules of life – the ones that are inflexible, taken out-of-context, misunderstood or – worse – mis-used – that demand our suspicion and sometimes our outright opposition.

“What’s it to be?” Moses asked the people: “life or death, blessing or curse?” And he said them, I think “[I *SO* much want you to choose life!] ***Choose life, so that you may live loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him.***”

I think Jesus would have said ‘Amen,’ and so, I think should we. And so, the people said: **Amen.**

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