

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Tony Campolo was a professor of Sociology at a college in Philadelphia. In the 1950's he was in the Air Force and being interviewed to be a bombardier on a plane. Tony was asked if he would be able to drop bombs on the enemy. He said he would have to ask what Jesus would do. The person interviewing him exploded, "You can't answer that way, we know what Jesus would do!" Tony didn't become a bombardier.

Some years ago there was a phrase going about, on wristbands and bumper stickers, that was abbreviated to WWJD. What would Jesus do? I generally supported the idea but didn't get into it much, thinking it was more like a fad. But I think it might be good to use this idea more in our society now. Too many people are making decisions on the basis of power or control, money and convenience. Instead of on Jesus' will. Let's take a look at Jesus in our Gospel text today.

Jesus and his disciples are walking along some grain fields. They are hungry and begin to reach into the field, take some heads of grain, crush them in their hands and eat them. It was allowed to reach into a field an arms length to do this. Not sure as a farmer I would like that. But it was allowed. The Pharisees, the devout Jewish people who made a point of keeping all the laws, saw this and criticized Jesus for allowing his disciples to work on the Sabbath. When the disciples crushed the heads of grain, they were technically "working" on the Sabbath, the day of rest.

Jesus responds by reminding the Pharisees that David and his friends, running from King Saul, were so hungry they went into a holy place and ate the bread of the Presence, that sat on the altar as a sign of fellowship with God. David was not criticized for that. Nor are priests in the Temple blamed for doing work on the Sabbath. Then he says there is one here, in their presence who is greater than the Temple. A rather strange statement. Jesus goes on to quote from Hosea that the Lord desires mercy and not sacrifice. If you knew this you wouldn't condemn the innocent.

Jesus operates under the requirement of what is the loving thing to do? For Jesus, love is the basis or foundation of society and community. He had said the greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all you heart and mind and soul and all your strength. A second command is to love your neighbor as yourself. What is the loving thing to do? Jesus resorts to this again and again and again. What is the loving thing to do?

Now laws are important and there are reasons for them and we have to ask how does Jesus see the place of laws when he resorts to love for a final decision? Think about cows and grass. Cows are meant to eat grass and grass is meant to be eaten by cows. But farmers will put fences around their cows. How come? Because cows don't know or care about boundaries. They will go anywhere they can and eat whatever they see. So you need to fence them in.

My daughter was in the Peace Corps in the Russian Far East, teaching English in small town. Every house in the village had a yard, but the yard was not grass but planted into vegetables for people to live on. Every yard had a fence around because the custom was for farmers in town, to let their cattle and calves out in the morning to roam the town, eating grass wherever they found it. Joayne and her fellow volunteer planted the whole yard into vegetables that first spring.

Their yard had a fence like all the rest. On the third day of school in September, they came home to find that the cows had knocked over the fence and eaten the tops off all the vegetables. Fences don't always work and they don't always work for people either. But there is a reason for fences.

Jesus calls us to do the loving thing. The loving thing to do is give people and animals a rest once a week; to respect the marriage of others and love your spouse; to use your property and let others have their property.

But there is a sinful self in each of us that acts like a cow meandering wherever it wants; taking what it shouldn't. So laws are made to be fences to our sinful self; to keep our sinful self within the proper boundaries. We have laws because we have a sinful nature, a sinful self that doesn't always want to do the loving thing and will trespass into other people's lives. So laws are set up to control us when love doesn't.

The loving thing is to care about others as much as we care about ourselves. But because we don't always want that, we need laws to limit how much we work ourselves or our employees; so that we don't have child labor or 80-90 hour weeks. The Sabbath laws were to protect our lives and renew ourselves every so often when love didn't control our actions.

We then find Jesus in the synagogue with a man who has a withered hand. Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath the Pharisees ask, to accuse Jesus. Jesus asks if they had a single sheep and it fell into a pit or ditch on the Sabbath and couldn't get out, what would you do? The law says you can't work. Love says you feel, have mercy for the sheep and you get it out. So Jesus then heals the man with the withered hand. Love, mercy is the foundation of Jesus' actions and decisions.

Now, remember that strange statement Jesus said in verse six: There is something greater than the Temple in this place. Looking back at it now, we realize Jesus was saying that he was the greater thing than the Temple. He was the presence of God and he was in their presence teaching them that God desires love and mercy to be driving our lives more than sacrifices or law keeping.

When Jackie Robinson was in his first year of playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers, the Philadelphia owner refused to let Jackie Robinson, the first black major league player to play in Philadelphia. Brooklyn Dodger owner Branche Ricke called the other owner and said, "When you get to heaven and Jesus Christ asks you why you didn't let Jackie Robinson play in Philadelphia, I think you're going to come up short!"

When we get to heaven, do we want Jesus Christ to ask us why we didn't live our lives on the basis of love? I don't think so! So maybe our daily prayer has to be, "Lord, come into my heart, come in this new day, come in to stay and help me live the love you want me to live in all I do and say." Amen.