

Have you ever seen some of the ridiculous old laws that still grace the books of some of our cities and towns? A fellow by the name of Dick Hyman has gathered together a collection of them – and they're hilarious. Did you know, for instance, that in Waterloo, Nebraska, it's against the law for barbers to eat onions? Or that, in Danville, Pennsylvania, the fire hydrants – *by law* – must be checked one hour before a fire?

I could go on and on, but you get the point. They're silly. And yet, they all have one thing in common. Back when they were passed, they *meant* something. They were enacted for a purpose.

OK, one more – just to illustrate my point. This one was on the books in New York City all the way up 'til 1985. As Jack Paar used to say (yeah, I'm that old...), "I kid you not." In New York, as recently as 1985, it was mandatory under the law to have an 8-foot pole on the front of your car with a red lantern at the end of it. Why? Well, there *was* a reason: the pole was there to warn cross traffic (*horse-drawn* cross traffic, that is) that you were entering an intersection.

Now, of course, after a while, such laws as this become little more than comic codes. They're laws that look silly – funny to read, but certainly not anything we take seriously. *Except* there really *is* a side to such laws that's *not* so funny. You see, when there are utterly ridiculous laws on the books, they have a way of belittling and undermining our respect for the *good* laws – the laws that are vitally necessary to a healthy society. Such laws give us an opening to question the very issue of law itself. And we often begin to regard laws – *all* laws – as little more than comic codes.

To some extent that's true of some perfectly serious laws. Take the speed limit, for instance. Would you not agree that it's good to have speed limits? Yet go out on I-95 sometime and see how many cars pass you flying if you adhere to the posted limit. The same, sadly, is true when it comes to distracted driving laws. Be honest: how many of you have texted while driving? See my point? And when we let even good laws become comic, the end can be awfully tragic.

Something I find even more tragic, however, is the way we have let our relationship with God get reduced to what I would call comic codes. How often it is that we reduce God to old, time-worn formulas and meaningless regulations. Instead of a God who instills excitement and awe and forgiving grace and love, we get a God who is diluted down to dull doctrines and stifling legalities.

That was the very problem Jesus confronted in the Gospel passage we just read. Some Pharisees are upset because the disciples don't wash their hands in the prescribed way. Now, understand, this wasn't a matter of personal hygiene. The Pharisees had never heard of germs as we understand them. No, for them, it was an issue of following a prescribed religious code. The Pharisees thought that God was pleased when the devout washed themselves in a particular way. And so, they drew up an elaborate legal code that detailed precisely how such washings were to take place. It extended not only to hands, but to cups, pots – even bed coverings.

Jesus was disturbed by this, and so he challenged it head-on. "You put aside God's command and obey human teachings!" Jesus tells them (quoting Isaiah, by the way). "God wants you to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength – to have a living relationship with God. But no, you Pharisees, all you see as important is your book of rules. What *should* be a living faith, you have reduced to dead ritual."

Now, you'd think we would have learned from Jesus on this matter, but it's my observation things haven't changed all that much. We Christians are often every bit as guilty as the Pharisees when it comes to twisting faith into a dull routine. The dynamic relationship offered us by our Lord gets reduced to nothing more than ritualistic religion.

Just ask people why they join a church sometime and you'll see what I mean by the answers they give. They talk about wanting to keep their kids out of trouble, or about pleasing grandma who wants to be sure the kids have a Sunday School education. Ask the proverbial man or woman in the street and you'll hear such things as "to teach children right from wrong" or "to learn the Ten Commandments."

Now, these are important issues, and I'm not saying our kids *shouldn't* learn right from wrong or the Ten Commandments. But these things miss the point – the heart of the matter. We're not here to learn the rules or to develop a sense of habit or duty. Going to church shouldn't be spoken of with about the same joy as contemplating cleaning the oven. If our faith has been reduced to a chore, rather than being a delight, we've missed the point entirely. Having the *forms* of godliness without their *power*, stands in full contrast to the full vision Jesus espouses.

James, in the Epistle we read this morning, talks about believing not as a static thing – for James, faith is a *verb*. "Be *doers* of the word and not *hearers* only," he tells the early Church. Don't just go through the motions. Faith has *power*...faith is an exciting adventure! A religion of form only, of habit or duty only, reduces God to that white-

bearded old man of our childhood conception of God: It's all about "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not." *That* God is not the God Christ reveals!

But I'll take this a step further. Not only is such religion without much joy or excitement, in the final analysis, it just plain *doesn't work*! That is, it doesn't change lives. It doesn't help us grow. It doesn't lead us to love. Only a living *relationship* with God in Jesus Christ can do that. No wonder Jesus said, "These people are far from me. They honor me with their words, but their hearts are far away." If we wonder why our church-going doesn't change us, or why our families aren't being spiritually fed by what we do here, perhaps the answer is right here. We've reduced it to *only* church-going – something on the outside – all the right words, formulas, what have you – but something that doesn't touch the heart.

There was a man who lived at about the turn of the 13th century, who knew what could happen if religion got reduced to this. He knew that if our faith became only formulas, only laws and traditions and theological treatises, we would be spiritually *dead*. He described his faith quite differently from all that. He described it as a love affair – a love affair with God, where Jesus Christ became the whole center of his being. This man, whom you and I have come to know as Francis of Assisi, became one of the great lovers of God of all time. But more than that, he became a man whose faith *worked*. He became one whose love of other people, whose love of the poor, led to a totally changed life. It led him to generosity, to simplicity, to devotion that has made him one of the true lights to this dark and broken world.

There's no reason you and I cannot have the same joy, the simple faith, of a Francis of Assisi. Today, and every day, Christ invites us to just such a faith – a faith that listens for the heartbeat of God's love. Is your faith in God a love affair – or is it just a theory? Is your religion just a tradition to be followed, or is it God's love proclaimed, as we *do* the word, not *hear* it only?

If you want your life to be a Spirit-filled adventure, Christ offers you that very opportunity. *But*, with that opportunity comes also a challenge. It is hard to accept the challenge to take our Christianity beyond tradition, beyond mere religion. But if in sincere prayer you open yourself to take on that challenge, the opportunity is enormous. And you *will* be changed. And you will wonder...why did I let myself miss out on this for so long?