

Rules for Life

Hang around me for a little while and you will likely learn that I arrived in Canada in Montreal, spent my first ten years in that city and that my undergraduate degree is in engineering.

This explains why the shooting in 1989 at the Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal where 14 women were separated from their fellow students and killed, and 14 others were injured, has always had a major impact on me as many of those impacted were engineering students. There are memorials every December 6th.

For the 20th anniversary I was part of team putting on a commemorative dinner. As we debated what we would do and how it would be organized, we drafted three goals for the event and prioritized them.

We worked through all the logistics of location, meal, speaker, guests, program and so on. Having our goals clearly established made the decision-making straight forward; if it did not align with a goal then we did not do it.

Happily, it was a successful event, and we also managed to raise some money towards a scholarship.

Our guidelines for this event were clearly written down; the reality is that we all live with rules in our lives about how we will behave. Rules that we have defined for ourselves.

These rules define the centre of our lives, they define our priorities. It might be having goal for the amount of money that we give to the church and other charities, or how much we save. It might be getting home in time to read a bedtime story to our children even if that means leaving work early, or getting outside for a walk every day. It might be saying grace before a meal or writing in a gratitude journal.

These unwritten rules define our priorities. What comes first, our job or our family? Not always easy if the threat, actual or implied, is that there will be no job if the overtime is not done. What comes first, our children or our parents? Not always easy if the parents are sick and there is no one else available to look after them. How do we fit friends into this, as friends are vital to our well-being? The priorities may change depending on our age and stage of life.

We can ask ourselves, what are my priorities? What am I willing to sacrifice for? What is most important to me? What do I want to be sure that we attend to?

Sometimes this centre can be difficult to know.

The monastic traditions have been good at articulating their rules. You may have heard of the Rule of St Benedict which balances prayer, manual labour and learning. Or the Rule of St Francis which emphasizes poverty, simplicity and fraternity. This is not limited to Christian monks, the Buddhist monks live under Vinaya which governs daily conduct, celibacy, simplicity and community living.

We learn a little about Jesus when the Pharisees asks him, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

It sounds like a pretty simple question, but then we already know what Jesus' answer is.

This is the third in a series of trick or tricky questions that Jesus' opponents have placed before him. The pitfall is that it is generally accepted in Hebraic tradition that there are 613 commandments and that they are all to be upheld with equal vigour. It is considered wrong to rank the commandments. And so they ask, which is the greatest?

Jesus, in his wisdom, quotes the Shema, the prayer from the book of Deuteronomy 6:5. It goes: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

Pious Jews were, and are, expected to recite this prayer every morning and evening, so the crowd around Jesus would have been very familiar with it.

Then Jesus says something very surprising; Jesus says, "And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'"

Taken from Leviticus 19, Jesus has put the neighbour on equal footing with God. The God of Israel is now also the God of their neighbours as well; this does not go down well with the Pharisees who liked to have God for themselves.

Jesus has defined the centre of his life, he has defined the rules that he will live by, he has defined who and what he will sacrifice for.

Love God and love your neighbour. After all his preaching and teaching, after all his travels and miracles, here, just days before his crucifixion, responding to the question from the Pharisees that was supposed to trip him up, Jesus' identity is crystalizing; Jesus names his centre - the centre of his ministry, the centre of his mission, the centre of the kingdom he has been sent to proclaim and build—and it is love. Love of neighbour, care and concern for each other. Orient your life toward God, however it is not possible to love God without loving what God loves.

In this, Jesus reveals something not only about himself, but also about God. That can be easy to miss, because so many of us learned somewhere along the way that while Jesus may have been a pretty nice guy, his Father was another matter altogether. Jesus talked about love but God seemed more interested in righteousness, very much like a judge, waiting to catch us

Here Jesus points to the true character of God's laws: to help us love and take care of each other and in this way to love God. The Ten Commandments, for instance, are the essential building blocks of a healthy community.

Just a few days after this encounter, Jesus will gather with his disciples, take some bread and wine, and invite them by eating and drinking to share his very life. After that meal, he will go out from that place of safety to embrace his destiny, going to the cross not to *make* God loving but to show us how much God loves us already, because ultimately the only way we can love each other is first to recognize just how much God loves us.

The centre of Jesus life is to love God and love neighbour.

What is at the centre of your life? What are the rules that you live by?

Thanks be to God for God's love of us.

Readings: Matthew 22:34-40