

Well, I finally struck out at finding something on the Internet. With all the You Tube and other clips one can find, I had assumed I could find either the script or an old kinescope recording of a particular skit done by the late comedian, Don Adams, best known for his years playing a spoof of a James Bond character as “Maxwell Smart” on the TV comedy, “Get Smart!”

The particular skit — and I did find reference to it with respect to a broadcast museum in New York and Los Angeles named after the legendary William S. Paley who created CBS — was about a school for baseball umpires. In the skit, Adams — using a particular voice he made reasonably famous — was an instructor speaking to his class of would-be umpires.¹ In simplest terms it went something like this:

There is a runner on third base and a batter in the right-hand batter’s box. The pitcher winds up and throws the ball, but as he does, his foot slips and he falls backward, throwing the ball high into the air, where it hits a bird that was flying too low. The runner on third breaks for the plate, and the first baseman recovers the ball from the bird and fires it toward the catcher at home plate. As you are observing, an ice cream vendor is in the stands behind the third base dugout. The runner slides for the plate. What is your call?

Harrison? “Chocolate.”

No, vanilla, but you’re close.

I cannot make it sound funny, but as a thirteen year old kid when I first heard him on one of those old Sunday evening TV variety shows, I thought that routine was hilarious; I would love to hear it again so I could repeat all that Adams put into it.

But I think there is a legitimate point illustrated by the joke: there can be lots of rules, as in baseball, but it is not possible to make specific rules for everything or every situation we might encounter in life.

Let me switch gears entirely. Patricia and I spent a day and one-half in beautiful Sedona this past week; the scenery is absolutely breath-taking, and while I had twice done hurried trips through Sedona, this was really the first time I drank in the scenery.

But of course, there is another aspect to Sedona, as these slides show, energy vortices and all that, though what the jewelry might be healing from, I do not know. While on the one-hand I was surprised, the surprise only lasted for a few seconds when the driver of our “Pink Jeep” told us that this mystic, energy vortices business only dates from the 1970’s, which I feel comfortable asserting had to have been of lineal descent from Haight-Asbury and the drug and “free-love” culture, the *no rules* culture, of the late 1960’s that carried into the ’70’s, though somewhat diminished. Rocks have feelings, too, I guess, and the most

¹ Steve Allen Show, April 28, 1957, <http://www.wouldyoubelieve.com/WOM/donadams1.htm>

unselfish manifestation of the *no-rules* self-centeredness of being a mystical part of the universe is that involvement with others was reduced to the bumper sticker I did not photograph, something about “Do Kindness.”

No rules. No rules, other than *carpe diem* and “Do Kindness,” and in the case of the rock worshippers and their brethren, no higher, un-diffused power, no god let alone no God. No striving for anything other than one’s connection to those energy vortices.

No rules; just the opposite of a “rule for *almost* everything.” But I think there is a middle ground.

Some of you may recall my once telling a parable told by a friend at my ordination seventeen years ago — gad, it was just 20 years ago next month that I entered seminary. He told of a school that was on a hill next to a road with heavy traffic. When kids were sent outside for recess, they would just sort of huddle around the school building, not playing ball or tag or whatever, just standing. Then the principal decided to put a fence up around the perimeter of the school grounds. What a change: recess would come and kids would be running and laughing and playing ball.

The point is simple: rules, laws, are conceptually — or at least, *ideally* — intended not to restrict people, but to enhance life, *even to provide joy*, for everyone, and one of the biggest obstacles I believe Christianity has to overcome is the idea that we are all about rules against having fun, to quote again H.L. Mencken, “Christians” — one version says, “Presbyterians” — “are united in the concern that someone, somewhere, may be having a good time.” Despite that “Presbyterians” version, Donald Trump claims to be Presbyterian. I suspect he doesn’t know the quote.

It is not possible to make rules for everything, and paying attention only to detailed rules can become an excuse for not doing what is morally and ethically correct — that is at the heart of Jesus’ comments in our Gospel lesson, — but without some rules or laws, we have not so much freedom as chaos. Imagine baseball without a strike zone or foul lines.

It is not a new issue.

Let me back up a bit. The Hebrew Bible passage we used today appears in the Lutheran Lectionary but not our own, which has a passage from the “Song of Songs” or “Song of Solomon,” which appears as an alternate in the Lutheran version. While I have used that passage for weddings, I am unlike the more orthodox who try to make of the Song of Songs an allegory about Christ’s love for His Church; I think it is a celebration of romantic and even carnal love, a biblical celebration of *fun*! But the Lutherans offered us the excerpt from Deuteronomy, one of two books that, as a layman, I felt were the most necessary reads of anyone who wanted to understand our faith — Paul’s letter to the Romans was the other, but I now agree it is hard to grasp Christianity without reading at least one if not all four versions of the Gospel.

“Deuteronomy” is *not* the Hebrew name for the fifth book of the Bible; that is *davrim*; Deuteronomy is the Greek name and means, “second law.” I find the book fascinating because it basically relates the view of history that is central to the Hebrew Bible: Follow the one true God, Yahweh, and his laws, and things will go well for the people; turn to other gods and ignore his laws and things will go bad. Of course, this presumes *law*, and Deuteronomy is filled with, if not what we would call, *law*, then indeed with a lot of detailed rules. Not so many and detailed, perhaps, as in Exodus and Leviticus, and maybe not enough to help baseball umpires, but plenty, enough to make a Sedona psychic’s head spin.

But Deuteronomy does repeat, though with somewhat different numbering — I think I have explained that there are really eleven commandments that are presented if we see the treatment in Exodus compared to that in Deuteronomy — Deuteronomy does repeat the Ten Commandments, themselves compact yet comprehensive, and then adds a bit later these wonderful words, a sort of mini-sermon on the First Commandment, known as the *Shema*:

Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD alone.

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart.

Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.

Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and

Write them on the doorpost of your house and on your gates.²

If those words sound vaguely familiar, it is because Jesus quotes them — with a subtle change that I appreciate — as the “first and greatest” commandment:

*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and **with all your mind, and with all your strength.**³*

Then Jesus, of course, adds:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself.⁴

Paul goes on to say, later in Romans but earlier in time in Galatians:

² Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (NRSV)

³ Mark 12:29-30 (NRSV)

⁴ *ibid* v. 31

*For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."*⁵

Paul is largely referring to what we refer to as the "second tablet" of the Ten Commandments, those dealing with neighbors and spouses and . . . parents!

Someone last week was a bit surprised when I commented that Paul's letters were written before the four canonical versions of the Gospel; it's true, but if you wonder, just ask me. But the point is, Paul did get it right, which is why Jesus was upset at the failure of some of the Jews to care for their parents, instead engaging in a practice not found in Deuteronomy called "Corban." Arising from Leviticus, it meant setting something aside for God so that it was not available for secular use — such as for helping one's parents. Of course, when the person would actually put the money to God's use was another matter, it could well be after the parents were dead that the person would change his mind, and Jesus apparently saw through this scheme and found those claiming it were basically trying to defend not helping those parents, violating, "Thou shalt honor thy father and thy mother."

So *Corban* was a rule too many, a rule that conflicted with the essence of the law. But then, Jesus also saw rules about defilement from food as unnecessary rules.

Martin Luther loved Paul's theology first put forward in Galatians and later in Romans that Christians enjoy a real freedom "from the law" because it is our faith in Jesus that guarantees our salvation, not our efforts to follow the law, because no matter how hard we try we shall fail. Wow, does this mean that all those laws in Deuteronomy and Exodus and Leviticus are meaningless?

Paul is too easily, and incorrectly misunderstood on that score, and was so misunderstood. It was and is possible to proclaim faith while not *really* buying into it, and that is part of what is addressed by the writer of the Epistle known as James — which Luther did not like because it does not proclaim the "Good News."

No, it does not, but what it does proclaim is that we cannot take the "freedom" of which Paul speaks as a reason *not to attempt* to do what is called for, either by the *Law*, by "Love God" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself"; it is a hollow faith that does not wish to do as God would have us do. The idea we, and I guess the Catholics as well, call *works* refers not to obeying the detailed rules of Deuteronomy and other sources, but refers to doing good for others, to showing that true love for our neighbor of which Jesus speaks.

And that is a rule in the best sense. It is not a rule about when strike three is not strike three, nor is it self-centered anarchy like handling "healing crystals," nor is it hard to remember.

⁵ Galatians 5:14 (NRSV)

August 30, 2015

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It is not a feeling we are to have; "love your neighbor" is not a call to sentiment, it is a call as to how we are to act and behave. It is not so easy to follow as it sounds, but if we truly love God with all our heart and soul and mind and spirit, we endeavor to follow it, and with God's help, at least sometimes we succeed.

It's the right call.

Amen