

Sermon for 20 June 2010
Pentecost 4; Proper 7, Year C

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Last week, when I was in New York, I saw something that I hadn't seen since moving to Batesville: *nannies*. Of course, some people in Batesville retain the services of a nanny, but they have perhaps a more visible presence in the City. In certain parts of town you can see them wrangling a child (or two or three) as they walk around the crowded streets. It's a tough job in a city so busy and laden with dangers. Perhaps the most difficult part of the job is simply transporting their charge to school at the beginning of the day and back home at the end, keeping them (as one parishioner here is fond of saying) "off the streets and out of the bars", away from the dangers of oncoming traffic and harried cyclists, out of the hands of those who might wish to harm.

It takes a tremendous amount of faith on the part of a parent to place their child in the hands of such a person, so a nanny must be trustworthy and conscientious. She must prove herself to care for the child as do that child's parents. She's not just performing a task, you see, but she must herself come to love the children as if they were her own to execute her job rightly.

The profession of the nanny is not a new one at all, and indeed Paul utilizes the profession as a metaphor in today's lesson from his letter to the Galatians. "The law was our *custodian*," he writes, "until Christ came." The word translated *custodian* here is not as vague in Greek as it appears in English. Paul actually says "The law was our *paidagogos* until Christ came." A *paidagogos* was a person with a very important job in the Greek speaking world. He was usually one of the highest ranked and most trusted slaves of the household and he had but one job: convey the children of the

household to the *gymnasium*, the local school, and get them back home again safely at the end of the day. He was just like those New York City nannies I was talking about. He had to be trusted a great deal for those parents to turn their kids into his hands. He had to care for the children as if they were his own to execute his job rightly.

So, Paul says, the Law of the Old Testament was our nanny. The Law gets us to school safely and gets us back home. The Law keeps us from stepping into the oncoming traffic of worldly concerns; it keeps us out of the hands of those who would kidnap our hearts and minds, not to get a ransom from a wealthy Upper East Side mother, but to pervert our faith and morals, to convince us that the God of Israel is not even our parent after all.

Now, if we were a Synagogue rather than a parish church, the sermon might end here. But for Paul, and for us, the metaphor must go one step further. We are no longer children. As I've said in

other sermons, we are expected to approach God as adults, to have a mature relationship with him. "We are no longer under a custodian", a *paidagogos*, a nanny. We are expected to live faithfully by our own choice.

Paul was addressing some very specific issues when he made this point. The Church in Galatia was in an uproar as it struggled to determine the requirements of Christianity. There were those who maintained that a gentile, should he wish to become a Christian, must first become a Jew. Specifically, this meant undergoing the rite of circumcision—less of an issue for an eight-day-old child as for an adult convert as you can imagine. On the other hand, there were those who claimed that Christianity was for all, not only for Jews and those who would become Jews. Believe it or not, this was probably the most controversial issue the church has ever faced. Forget about all of the fights we've had about new prayerbooks, and women

priests, and sexuality and the rest. Whether or not a gentile could become a Christian without becoming a Jew was far more controversial, and to be honest, a far more important question, because it was about the availability of salvation itself to the 99% of the world's population that wasn't fortunate enough to be born Jewish.

Paul, as you're well aware, sides with the so-called "uncircumcision party". He says that you don't have to become a Jew to become a Christian:

For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ [he writes]. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

For Paul, and for the Church, the Law was certainly God-given, it was certainly good, but it was like one of those nannies, and it took us to school and back home while we were young, but now we're older and it's up to us to get on without a nanny. Our parent, God himself, trusts us to do that. It's a lot harder than having our hand held

by a nanny; it's a lot harder than knowing all the time exactly what the rules are, exactly what our boundaries are, exactly where all the dangers lie on the road. Even so, God trusts us to take on the challenge.

But, oh how we love rules! Maybe not all of us are preternatural rule-followers, but I know I am. I'm not sure sometimes if I'm a very good Christian, but I believe I'd make an excellent Orthodox Jew. Knowing what is permitted to eat and what not, when and how precisely to pray, being given a specific moral guide in the form of "shalls" and "shall nots": it would be very comforting to me, anyway, and in some sense easier than having my relationship with God predicated on something so vague as *faith*.

The Franciscan Friar and Catholic man-of-letters Richard Rohr has speculated that the majority of Christians are still, in a sense, living under the law. While the Old Testament

injunctions against pork and the requirement of ritual circumcision and the rest are no longer deemed requirements, many have set up alternative sets of rules. What precisely the rules are is beside the point. The point is that the natural view of religion is that it must have at its heart certain rules which serve as the center of the religion. Whether or not we preach it, it is only natural to see our faith as an exercise in rule-following, to boil Christianity down to the "shalls" and "shall nots" and see them as the central message.

What Paul tells us is that, to the contrary, Christianity is not about rules but about a relationship: a relationship of faith. While it is easier to follow rules than to truly trust God, the latter is what it's all about. What's more, rules can breed elitism and contempt. Rules can divide. But a trusting, loving relationship with God is

open to all, Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female.

None of this is to say that there are no moral or religious expectations that could be seen as rules. The ten commandments are still important, and Jesus gives us some rules himself: "love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, and soul and your neighbour as yourself" is a good one. But, you see, the rules aren't the center. They all proceed from the relationship of faith and love which we have with God. That relationship is the core. So, for those of us who are rule-followers this might be difficult, but the Good News is that we are now free to build that relationship on terms other than laws. We can build that relationship through our own prayer and discernment, through our own loving relationship with God with the guidance of the Church. Without the nanny holding our hand, we're now able to create our own kind of relationship with God and each other. True, the way

is beset by dangers, but the kind of relationship we can have is all the better because of this freedom we have in Christ Jesus.

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Amen.