

A New Covenant

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The airline industry is extremely complicated.

A host of federal regulations, the need for flawless safety records, different unions representing pilots and flight attendants.

They have to interact with multiple federal agencies, The FAA providing air traffic control and the TSA providing security screening.

That is to say nothing of what happens when there is a big snow storm, passengers need to be rebooked, flights rescheduled, lost baggage found.

As you might expect therefore, airlines have a very complex set of regulations and procedures for their employees

I know a man named Marty St. George who once worked for a large airline in a position of senior leadership. He told me that they had a set of 28 binders called “the regs.”

These contained down to the most minute detail how gate agents and flight attendants were meant to handle every conceivable situation. How the people who answered their phone were meant to interact with customers. Who could do what, and when. And what people could not do.

If you have ever had an experience with an airline where it felt like the person you were speaking with was being needlessly inflexible. This is why. The regs.

I remember an experience once trying to get back to Boston from Charlotte while I Was in college. Everyone involved agreed my request to get on a flight was perfectly reasonable. I held a ticket for the same airline, along the same route, just at a later time.

There was a storm coming and I was already at the airport and thought I could get out a little early, save them the trouble of having to rebook me if the later flight got cancelled.

This was something I had managed to do many times before.

Yet I was met with that most frustrating of responses: “the computer won’t let me.”

We had come to the limit of the regs. They were not serving us. We were serving them.

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This is an important test of systems and structures. Do they work for us? Are they making our lives easier? Or harder? Are they promoting the best in us? Promoting flourishing? Or are they crushing us under a weight of unreasonableness?

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It is easy to forget that Jesus was born, lived, and died as a Jew. Not once in his life, or in his resurrected appearances did he suggest starting a new religion. Rather his desire seemed always to reform the religious tradition that he was born into.

It seems that at the heart of his movement was a desire to ask questions of the laws and practices his community took for granted. He was not alone in this. In fact we hear it in the words of the prophet Jeremiah from this morning's readings, who speaks of a new covenant inscribed in the hearts of God's people. One rooted in grace.

Often Jesus was challenged about his practice of healing people even on the sabbath. "The sabbath was made for humanity" he replied, "not humanity for the sabbath."

Which of you, he asked them, if one of your children fell into a well on the sabbath, would you not pull her out?

When Jesus saw a crowd about to execute a woman who had been found to be cheating on her husband, he bent down to write their sins in the dust, and ask, which of them was sinless enough to pass judgement. They dropped their stones and walked away.

In each of these moments we see Christ asking a question of his tradition. Does it work? Is it promoting human flourishing? Or is it crushing us?

Jesus lived at the edge of the regulations, saw the places where their application was clearly not holy work, and challenged people to think for themselves about what God desires.

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After a few years, Marty left his job for a similar position at a new airline. JetBlue.

And during his orientation to the new position, rather than a shelf's worth of binders to guide his decision making, he was instead handed a single sheet of paper. It read:

Safety

Caring

Fun

Integrity

Passion

Rather than thousands of regs. JetBlue simply had 5 values. As he explained to me, this is not just training for executives, but gate agents, pilots, flight attendants, baggage handlers. From top to bottom in the company every employee is empowered to make their own decisions and exercise their own judgement, so long as they act in accordance with these values.

It must be safe.

It should demonstrate caring.

It should promote fun.

It should be done with integrity.

It should honor passion.

He admits that when he first picked the page up, he turned it over to see if there was more on the back. Nope.

Marty tells a great story about how these values were able to come to life:

Once on a flight from Boston to Las Vegas a crew member in the course of ordinary conversation discovered that a couple on the flight was on their way to Vegas to elope.

Chris, the flight attendant, pitched them a different idea. An inflight wedding.

They were into the idea, so flight attendants went to work, making a two-tone bouquet of flowers using the blue and white plastic trash bags.

They brought the couple to the front of the plane, and one of the flight attendances presided.

Marty says he is nearly certain that at his old airline, the crew members would have been reprimanded for wasting the plastic bags, which cost about 2 cents each.

We use this phrase all the time Marty says, “do the right thing.” “If you can do the right thing and do it consistent with the values, it is very tough to get in trouble with JetBlue.”

Recently, as people were evacuating Florida ahead of the hurricanes, JetBlue decided to offer all their seats out of Florida for \$99, despite the fact that their computer models were telling them they could probably get \$800 for them.

Marty has also told me a story of his front line employees moving heaven and earth to get a woman from California to see her grandson who was critically injured in the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. Nothing in the computer prevented them from finding her the fastest route to her family.

Its a simple idea, allowing people to use their God given minds and hearts to act humanely.

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And I think this is the purpose of our faith. The faith that Jesus teaches us. The faith of the New Covenant. Written on our hearts.

“The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with my people. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

This is the place where God writes on our hearts. Places the values within us that free us to act with love and hope in the world.

And these values, and this love, and this hope, is made for your life. Your everyday life.

What it means to be a disciple of Christ, is to be a person who carries the values of God’s love in your heart, and that you act in accordance with those values that God has inscribed on your heart.

People may never know that is why you are the way you are.

But you will be sharing God's love with all the world.