

The Rules

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In 2004, our denomination, the United Church of Christ, was searching for a way to give expression to the shared identity of all our churches. Our churches, spread across the United States, have many differences, but seeing the need for a national marketing strategy, denominational leaders went to work to articulate a clear and concise expression of who we are.

And they came up with this phrase:

“God is still speaking.”

The technical theological term for what they are saying there is that we believe in “continuing revelation.” That is, that God did not just speak to certain people long ago, but, if we listen, God is still speaking to us today.

Puritan Minister John Robinson gave a sermon on the decks of the Mayflower, before it departed for these shores, in which he said it like this: "I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more light, and more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word"

More truth to break forth.

More light.

A continuing revelation.

God is still speaking.

It is this commitment to listen for God's still speaking voice has led to more light and truth breaking forth indeed in this corner of creation.

It was that willingness to listen for God's Still Speaking voice that allowed the Congregational Church in this area to be the first to ordain a woman to ministry. Rev. Antionette Brown in 1851.

Something that people had long felt was a simple settled fact, that God only wanted men as ministers.

It was the willingness to listen for God's Still Speaking voice that led New England Congregationalists as early as 1700 to speak out against slavery, and later led to the creation of the first anti-slavery society that had freed slaves as leaders of the movement in 1846.

And it was the willingness to listen for God's Still Speaking voice that led the United Church of Christ to ordain the first openly gay minister in Christian history, Rev. William R. Johnson in 1971 and to declare the denomination open and affirming of all people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity in 1985.

This is the reason for our congregational meetings, and our boards and committees. To listen for God's still speaking voice, to discern where we are being called next, to discover how God is at work in new and unexpected ways in the world today.

We speak eloquently about encountering God in the beauty of the Earth.

Many of our hymns sing about God's presence in breaking morning light and budding flower.

The Psalm we sang this morning begins with perhaps the most beautiful expression of God's still speaking voice in all of scripture:

The heavens declare the glory of God;
and the sky proclaims God's handiwork.

Day to day pours forth God's speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech, nor are there words;
Yet God's voice goes out through all the earth,
even to the end of the world.

And so we profess, along with scripture, the truth that each one of us can encounter God's tug on our lives, not only in ancient words, but in the ways we meet God even still today.

But there is a second half to this Psalm. A part that, along with our reading of the Ten Commandments today, gives voice to another source of God's revelation.

The Law.

After extolling the presence of God's voice heard through the beauty of the Earth, breaking forth anew day after day, the Psalm takes a turn, saying:

The law of God is perfect,
reviving the soul;

The precepts of the LORD are right,

They rejoice the heart;

God's Law is more desired than gold
and sweeter than honey.

This language is a little less natural to us. We don't have many hymns in our hymnal that sing about how beautiful God's rules are.

How happy and grateful we are that God has made laws.

Rather I think most of us associate the rules with judgement. God's law is seen as an impossible standard whose purpose is to just make us feel bad for all the ways we mess up.

Many of us learned these laws as a rubric against which we would be found wanting.

Many of us meet them only as a source of shame.

Maybe we will admit that some rules are necessary, but we certainly don't see God's rules as something to sing praises for. I don't think many of us would join the Psalmist in saying that God's law "revives our soul."

We are people who value freedom. Who strive to listen for the new words breaking forth from God's word. Who challenge the rules of the past with the truth of how we encounter God in the present.

We are people who strive to know God more in God's love than God's judgment.

But here it is, in the midst of the Psalms, texts that give voice to spiritual experiences that often go unspoken.

Right alongside the praise of God's Still Speaking voice.

Praise of the law. The law. Sweeter than honey. More more precious than Gold.

The voice of scripture invites us to see the law in this way, not as a source of shame, or fear, or judgement.

But as a source of joy.

A few years ago a comedian and voice actor named H. Jon Benjamin, known for voicing the title roles on television's *Archer* and *Bob's Burgers*, decided to branch out.

Using his own money he rented out a recording studio, and hired respected musicians to play back up on a new experimental jazz album.

Scott Kretzer on saxophone, David Finck on bass, and Jonathan Peretz on drums.

Jon Benjamin was on piano, and instrument that, unfortunately, he does not know how to play.

The resulting album is nearly impossible to listen to. About 30 minutes of a soft skillful jazz trio in the background, with the lead artist pounding on piano keys at random.

Benjamin titled the album “Well I Should Have...” subtitled “Learn to Play the Piano.”

The concept is pretty funny.

But the resulting cacophony is a good reminder that even a genre as free-form as jazz still needs some rules.

And listening to it for even 2 minutes will suddenly give you a new appreciation for the values of organized scales, chords, and basic principles of harmony and melody.

Freedom alone is not enough to create beautiful music.

This is the beauty of God's law.

The reason that the Psalmist sings the praises of God's rules.

The reason that God's rules revive the soul and taste as sweet as honey.

Because the law holds boundaries which create the conditions for human flourishing.

The law gives us the basic shared set of rhythm and scales, so that we can live out our freedom in a way that will not harm others, that will in fact create beauty, and more love.

God's law is not there to make us feel oppressed by impossible expectations. Rather they hold boundaries within which we can listen to, and respond, to God's still speaking voice freely.

We are surely a people who value freedom, freedom of thought, conscience, and expression. Indeed we give glory to God by responding to God's Still Speaking voice. By witnessing to the new light that breaks forth in each successive generation.

And too we are a people bound by a rule of life. Committed together to shared values, and a shared way of being in the world.

Holding God above all else, and never worshiping something which is less than God.

Bringing no harm to others.

Honoring our sacred commitments.

And living in peace with neighbors and strangers alike.

Those are the rules.

Not to make you feel bad.

Just to set the edge, so that you can live boldly in search of God's
call to us this day.

