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“How long will you straddle the issue. If the Lord is God, follow him” (1 Kings 18:20).

*1 Kgs 18:20-39; Matt 5:17-19*

Today’s Gospel about Jesus and the law suggests that the early church felt the need to respond to critics who said that he was a lawbreaker. It was a way to argue that he could not have been from God, because obedience to the Law was so central to Jewish life. It also justified what happened to Jesus when he was excommunicated by the Sanhedrin and then executed by Rome as a criminal. He deserved to die because he was a lawbreaker.

What we find in the Gospels, of course, is that Jesus placed the spirit of the law above the letter of the law. In his quarrels with the scribes and Pharisees over the Sabbath, Jesus argued that he was obeying the higher law of compassion by healing on the Sabbath. He shocked righteous people by associating with sinners, touching lepers, disregarding strict handwashing rituals, disrupting flagrant commerce in the temple. He obeyed the law of God instead of human rules that violated the deeper intent of the Commandments. So, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it clear that he has not come to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill them, down to the smallest part of the law.

There are many ways in which laws have been used to obstruct people’s legitimate needs and dignity. Despite their Constitutional right to vote, millions of black Americans were denied access to the polls by fees and literacy tests. Discrimination was made legal by intricate rules used to confuse and intimidate people of color who

tried to vote. Immigration laws have also been interpreted to brand refugees as criminals, deny them international and human rights. Minor infractions have been used to profile and arrest minorities and charge them with offenses that later deny them housing, jobs, social and economic benefits others receive, including the right to vote.

Wherever strict legalism is enforced, the suspicion arises that the law is being used to screen and exclude people, to target certain groups and justify harsh treatment because they are lawbreakers and do not deserve protections or human consideration.

Elijah confronted the false prophets of Baal, telling the people they had to decide whom they would serve, the Lord or a false god. He accused them of wanting to have it both ways, claiming they were being faithful while compromising the covenant they had committed themselves to when God brought them up out of Egypt. "How long will you straddle the question. Either follow Baal or the Lord." There was no middle ground.

Being faithful to the Holy Spirit when legal practices violate the spirit of compassion is difficult. It is easier to go along to get along than to take a stand on principle. Civil disobedience to protest injustice has cost many people their freedom but not their consciences and moral integrity. Discernment is hard work when blind obedience is rewarded and wins social approval.

Jesus faced more opposition from self-righteous hypocrites than from outright enemies. He endured petty, hair-splitting rules, distorted priorities that praised scrupulosity and ignored real virtue, strained the gnat and swallowed the camel, saw the speck in a brother's eye but missed the beam in your own.

The hardest challenge and the greatest freedom for disciples is make love the measure and highest rule in every circumstance and to do the right thing according to your conscience, no matter the cost.

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