

## Sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time - A

2 weeks ago, the New York Times Sunday edition carried a story and composite picture on the front page that featured the 3 tallest and 3 shortest mayors of New York City. Fiorello LaGuardia, at 5 ft 2 inches, was pictured as one of the shortest. He was mayor of New York City during the worst days of the Great Depression and throughout all of World War II. Although short in stature, in many ways, he was larger than life. LaGuardia was a colorful fellow who used to ride to fires on the New York City fire trucks, was known to raid speakeasies with the police department, and took entire orphanages to baseball games. Whenever the newspapers went on strike, he would go on the radio and read the Sunday comics to the kids.

The story is told, that on one bitterly cold January night, he turned up at a night court that served the poorest ward of the city. LaGuardia dismissed the judge for the evening and took over the bench himself. Within a few minutes, a tattered old woman was brought before him, charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She told the Mayor that her daughter's husband had deserted her, the daughter was sick and her 2 grandchildren were starving. Despite her plight, the shopkeeper she had stolen from refused to drop the charges. LaGuardia sighed, turned to the woman and said, "The law is very clear. I've got to punish you. The law makes no exceptions--\$10 or 10 days in jail. Then the mayor reached into his pocket, pulled out a bill and threw it down saying, "Here is (the payment for) the \$10 fine which I now remit; and furthermore I am going to fine everyone in this courtroom 50 cents for living in a town where a person has to steal bread so that her grandchildren can eat. He ordered the bailiff to collect the fine, from the various characters in the courtroom, and give them to the defendant. The bewildered old woman went home with \$47.50.

Today's gospel from St. Matthew shows that the life and teachings of Jesus is not a breakaway from past Jewish traditions but a continuation. Jesus tells us that he has not come to do away with the law but to carry it to its fulfillment. The disciples, whom he was speaking to, were for the most part Jewish. They knew the Ten Commandments. They had been taught by their rabbis. These Rabbis, who were largely Pharisees, put all the stress on the letter of the law, and its external observance.

The Scribes and Pharisees had mistaken how to fulfill the Law. They were concerned about outward appearances not the depth and spirit of the law.

At this time The Jews used the expression THE LAW in 4 different ways:

1. The 10 Commandments
2. The Pentateuch (The 5 Books of Moses – 1<sup>st</sup> 5 books of Old Testament)
3. The whole Scripture (The Law and the Prophets)
4. And...The Oral or the Scribal Law (that is the various Rules and Regulations)

It was the Scribal Law that Jesus so utterly condemned, as these laws were superficial and unnecessarily burdened the people. They had been taught to believe that salvation came only through adhering to the 613 laws of the Torah.

Jesus did not condemn the scribes and Pharisees for the goodness they sought, rather he condemned them for what they did not have in their hearts. They had no depth. They governed their thoughts and actions by their external observance of the Jewish laws and how they appeared in the eyes of others.

In today's Gospel, Jesus talks about some of the 10 Commandments. The Ten Commandments are the essence and foundation of all the law. Their entire meaning can be summed up in the words RESPECT or REVERENCE:

Reverence for God and for His Name  
Reverence for His day

Respect for parents  
Respect for life

Respect for property  
Respect for personality

Respect for truth & another's good name  
Respect for oneself

The old law forbid murder, but Jesus teaches us that it is not enough to refrain from killing our brother or sister. We have to do a lot more. We have to be concerned about their wellbeing. We have to love. If we are angry with them, we must reconcile. Anything less keeps us from God.

Then, Jesus says that it is not enough to refrain from lust and committing adultery. We have to avoid anything that leads us in that direction—anything that causes us to be unfaithful to our spouse in any way. Jesus' new law teaches us to love our neighbor as

ourselves. For those who are married, what closer neighbor do we have than our spouse. Love in marriage doesn't just happen. It requires dedication, commitment, responsibility, putting the other person first...all of this in a secular society that often teaches us that "me" comes first.

The Scribes and Pharisees kept the law and the Commandments very carefully. They observed the external requirements of the Law but they did not have the spirit which is the foundation of the Law- to Love God and to Love one's neighbor.

Christ is not abolishing the 10 commandments but he is demanding of his followers a more perfect, a more sincere fulfillment of them.

Who are the Scribes and Pharisees today? What governs the laws and rules by which we Christians live? Do we base our actions on our concern for others OR on what others will think of us. With Lent just around the corner, we have yet another opportunity to take a long, hard look at ourselves...lest we consider ourselves to be so much better than the Scribes and Pharisees.

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