

“Don’t Mess me ‘Round”

Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Roland De Vries

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You may know the CBC radio program, Shift, with Tom Allen – it’s the CBC program that makes the transition from classical music earlier in the day to rock or independent pop music late in the afternoon. At the beginning of the program you are likely to hear movements from a Beethoven symphony or a violin concerto by Bartok. But by the end of the program you are likely to hear R.E.M. or Arcade Fire or Sarah Harmer.

I remember a few years ago listening to Shift toward the end of its timeslot, when Tom Allen introduced a song by telling a story that has stuck in my mind. It was about visiting friends of his who own a guesthouse in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. These friends had a problem with bears in the spring, when the bears would come out of hibernation and would be hungry and on the prowl for food. The bears would show up around the guesthouse, trying to get into the garbage, scrounging for food. And so his friends had to chase away the bears – scare them off on a regular basis. (Maybe you are more likely to have this problem there in Kamloops than I am in downtown Montreal.)

One morning he was there, a bear was out near the garbage area, and Tom’s hosts asked if he wanted to give a try at scaring the bear away. He agreed and he went out on the porch and started shouting at the bear, yelling at that bear to get away. The bear didn’t even look up. That screaming city boy wasn’t going to startle a bear enough to send it running. Sort of like us with our raccoons, I suppose – you yell at them, and they just kind of look up at you like, “What’s your problem?” But at that point, the woman who owned the guesthouse with her husband took over. She took a can of tomatoes with her, threw it at the bear, and shouted at the bear with an intensity and volume that Tom Allen just could not muster. And when the bear saw the tomatoes fly, and heard this woman deploying her vocal cords, it took off running.

Well, this story was Tom’s way of introducing a song by the British singer-songwriter Clare Maguire. She has a great big voice – a voice approaching the bigness of Adele’s. Or even more, perhaps, like that of the late Amy Winehouse.

The song that Tom Allen was introducing with the story of the bear was a song entitled “Don’t mess me ‘round.” The song has a great, catchy pop rhythm – but above all it has a gritty and powerful feel of blues. When Maguire sings with her big voice, there is a strength of personality, a bigness of personality that comes through the whole song – especially the refrain – which offers the same words as the song’s title “Don’t mess me ‘round.”

The song is about a relationship gone bad. It is a kind of gritty and strong and personal response to a man who has been less than open and respectful and faithful. The refrain is essentially saying: “Don’t treat me like this; you can’t treat me like this; I won’t let you treat me like this.” Don’t mess me ‘round. If you might be into this kind of music it’s worth looking for it – easy to find wherever you listen to music these days.

But how do we get from this big-voiced, bluesy British singer to our passage for today from Leviticus. This passage of scripture that is a list of laws and rules and commands. At one level, this passage feels kind of sterile if we just pick up the bible and read it.

But one of the interesting things about Leviticus chapter 19 is that it has a refrain that is repeated throughout. It’s repeated a total of 15 times in that chapter. The writer will give a series of commands, and then the refrain is repeated. A few more laws are identified, and the refrain is repeated:

Don’t steal or tell lies or cheat others.

I am the Lord your God.

Don’t make promises you don’t intend to keep.

I am the Lord your God.

Don’t hold grudges.

I am the Lord your God.

Don’t gossip about others.

I am the Lord your God.

Don’t take advantage of those who are weak.

I am the Lord your God.

As I think about this text from Leviticus, and that song by Claire Maguire, I can’t help but link these two pieces of poetry. I have begun to think to myself that we really need to hear that refrain

of Leviticus 19 spoken with the same degree of intensity and grittiness with which Maguire sings her refrain: *Don't mess me 'round.*

Don't mess me 'round.

I am the Lord your God.

Let the voice of God today be the voice of a strong, big-voiced woman that says with bluesy intensity and with grit and volume. I am the Lord your God. Don't mess me 'round.

Now right away we might feel some resistance. Within ourselves and our culture there is a deep resistance to any linking of faith and law. Almost instinctively, we don't want a religion of law. We don't want a God who gives laws. We don't want a God who gives us commands in any way shape or form. There is an entirely negative conception of Christian faith when it is linked to "thou shalt" and "thou shalt not." That's especially the case if those commands are backdropped by a voice that declares: "I am the Lord your God. Don't mess me 'round."

Culturally speaking, we prefer a Christian faith that lets us remain who we are but leads us toward a fulfilled life – a life of happiness and peace and comfort. Of course we also want to be good and kind people, and we want to be on the receiving end of goodness and kindness. But faith thought of as obedience to the commands of God is considered backward and retrogressive today.

But it seems to me that both the song by Clare Maguire, and scriptural text, push back against this logic – both our text and the song by Maguire resist our resistance to rules and law. Maguire's song is essentially a complaint and a command – don't mess me 'round. Or the song is a series of commands:

Don't lie to me.

Don't treat me like an object.

Don't cheat on me.

Be honest with me.

Those are the rules. Obey them.

There are beautiful ways of living and relating that are to be celebrated and elevated – and there are ugly and harmful ways of living that we should resist and refuse and deny. In our everyday

lives, in fact, we live with the reality of commands. In our everyday language we use the imperative language of commands. That's not the only way we can speak about the lives to which we are called – and it's not the only way to invite one another to lives that are truly human.

Sometimes we say: "Let's foster a relationship that is built on the honesty and transparency." But sometimes we need to say, "Don't lie to me."

Sometimes we can say: "We can flourish together in community if we support one another in our weaknesses." But sometimes we need to say: "Don't take advantage of him."

In our pandemic context we might say: "We need to care for one another and protect each other." But sometimes we put it like this:

Wash your hands!

Stay 2 meters apart!

Don't spend time with people outside your bubble!

Here in Montreal we still say: "Don't leave your home after 9:30 p.m.!"

In our everyday lives and our everyday relationships we rely on this kind of language – in fact it is very difficult to imagine living without it. And if we use this kind of language of command in our everyday lives, then is it any surprise that this kind of language, the language of law, finds a central place in God's relationship with his people. Again, this is not the only way we can speak about the lives to which God invites us and how to get there – but this language is a fundamental way we need to talk about God in relation to our lives.

There is one command in this passage from Leviticus that we will probably have recognized almost immediately. It's the same fundamental law that Jesus will later extend to his followers: "Love others as much as you love yourself." Yes, we remember, the love command of Jesus finds its origins in the Old Testament – and not only in the Old Testament but in what is perhaps the most avoided book of the Old Testament – in Leviticus. "Love others as much as you love yourselves." Or as Jesus puts it, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

And once again, there are other ways to encourage this possibility of a loving relationship with our neighbours. Jesus encourages such relationships through the telling of stories – he encourages such relationships by embodying certain practices for us to see. But sometimes he also uses the

language of command – the language of “thou shalt.” And he even uses it in relation to love. You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

Most of the commandments we read in Leviticus 19 are commands that give substance to the love command. The commands of Jesus and Leviticus actually provide a filling out what exactly it means to love others. These laws challenge us and command us to live in the ways of transparency and honesty and compassion and justice. Appealing back to the language of that Clare Maguire song, perhaps we could read each of these commands in Leviticus 19 as a command not to mess our neighbours around.

Your neighbours who deserve your honesty and respect – don’t mess them ‘round by lying to them or cheating them or gossiping about them.

The poor are owed a share of the produce of your land – don’t mess them ‘round by taking all of the produce out of your fields, and leaving them hungry.

If there are people against who you are inclined to seek revenge – don’t mess them ‘round by letting your anger get the better of you.

There are individuals who have special needs and who face challenges in daily living – don’t mess them ‘round by putting up roadblocks to their success and wellbeing.

These commands meet us very much where we are in our daily lives – they meet us so directly. We may need to adjust the language slightly for our time and context – but these commands to honesty and justice and compassion and truth-telling and integrity – these are straightforward commands that find direct application in our lives.

Finally today, a word about the refrain of Leviticus 19, a refrain that reminds us where these commands come from: I am the Lord your God.

This refrain reminds us that law is ultimately rooted in God. The laws that govern our daily lives shouldn’t be based simply on the wishful thinking of particular individuals or legislators. The laws that govern our lives shouldn’t be based simply on the latest version of common sense in our culture. The laws that govern our lives, as the laws of Leviticus 19, are to be rooted in the God of who created

the world, who enters into covenant with us, and who has redeemed us in Christ Jesus. It is the God of creation and covenant who gives us the gift of our lives, the gift of the human family, and who gives us the terms under which we may live our lives beautifully and meaningfully.

Perhaps we could summarize this text for today as follows.

I am the Lord your God. Don't mess me 'round.

You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Don't mess your neighbour 'round.

Thanks be to the God of law and love, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.