

## Of Pharisees, Pots, Bronze Kettles, Liturgical rubrics, Cups and Cats



Several years ago, I was at church meeting where we were discussing liturgical rubrics. There was heated discussion over a number of issues: Should the congregation be standing or kneeling during the Eucharistic prayer? What is the most reverent way to receive communion? Should laypersons be allowed to cleanse the chalice and cups after communion?

At one point, a woman made a rather pious interjection, inviting us to ask ourselves: "What would Jesus do?" The man chairing the meeting, already drained of patience by the disagreements in the room, responded in irritation: "Jesus has nothing to do with this! We're talking about liturgical norms!" The words were barely out his mouth when, to his credit, he realized that somehow that didn't sound right. We all realized it too, and have reminded this good man many times of his faux pas; but, in honesty, his remark voiced the feeling of 95% of the room.

Allow me a second story, to illustrate the same point: I am part of a theological faculty that is helping over one hundred young men prepare for ordination and is helping several hundred lay persons deepen their spiritual lives and prepare to serve in various forms of ministry. Who could ask for a higher task? But the sacredness of the task is not always front and center. A couple of years ago, we came to an Executive meeting and the two salient items on the agenda were "cups and cats": Our school, not with complete unanimity, was phasing out all disposable cups. As well, we were debating as to whether to open up our campus as a certain sanctuary for feral cats. As he introduced the agenda, our Dean of Theology asked the question: "How did we get to this? We're a theological institute preparing people for ministry - and the big-ticket items on our agenda are "cups and cats"?"

What these two stories have to teach us is that we struggle, still, with the same issues that beset the Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' time. And I say this sympathetically. We're human and invariably we lose perspective, just as the Scribes and Pharisees did. Jesus regularly chided them for, as he put it, "abandoning the commandment of God and holding to human traditions" and consequently getting overly- focused on rituals to do with "the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles". We generally stand under this same indictment. We too tend to lose the center for the periphery.

What is the center? The great commandment of God, that Jesus chides the Scribes and Pharisees for losing sight of, is the invitation to love God above all else and to love your neighbor as yourself. That is the one, great, central law. But in order to live that out practically, we need many ancillary laws, about everything from liturgical rubrics to cups and cats. And these laws are good, providing that they never stand alone, autonomous, not bending to the one great commandment to love God and neighbor.

In both society and in our churches, we have made many laws: civil laws, criminal laws, church laws, canon laws, liturgical laws, and all kinds of laws and guidelines inside our families and within the venues where we work. It is naïve to believe, idealistically, that we can live without laws. St. Augustine once proposed that we could live without laws: "Love and do as you wish!" But, love, as he defined it in this context, meant the highest level of altruistic love. In other words, if you are already a saint you don't need laws. Sadly, our world, our churches, and we ourselves, don't measure up to that criterion. We still need laws.

But our laws, all of them, and at every level, are not meant to stand alone, to have their own autonomy. They must bend towards and give acquiescence to a center, and that center is the one great law that relativizes all others: Love God above all else and love your neighbor as yourself.

There is a principle central in all moral theology that in part encapsulates this, the principle of Epikeia (from the Greek, *epieikes*, meaning reasonable). Laws are meant to be reasonable and are meant to be obeyed in a way that doesn't violate rationality and common sense. Epikeia is what St. Paul had in mind when he taught that the letter of the law kills while the spirit of the law brings life. In essence, what Epikeia asks of us is that, as we apply a given law in any circumstance of our lives, we ask ourselves the question: "If the law-maker were here, given the intent of this law, what would he or she want me to do in this situation?" That would bend the law to its center, to its sacred intent, to its spirit, and ensure that all our disagreements about pots, bronze kettles, liturgical rubrics, cups, and cats would remain loyal to the question: "What would Jesus do?"

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