

My Place in Line

Exodus 20: 1-17 | Psalm 19 | John 2: 13-22

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Most people want to play by the rules and have little interest in cutting the line. The problem these days is that it's hard to find the line and confusing to locate your place in it. Just think about going to the grocery store on a busy evening. How discernible is the line at the checkout counter when everyone is standing at least six feet apart? At that spacing when there are more than a few customers, the lines to different checkout counters converge in the aisle and it's not always immediately clear where you should stand at the end of the line. Chick-fil-A, by contrast, has mastered the science of lining people up. Most people know Chick-fil-A as a fast food chain so driven by the values of its evangelical owners that its restaurants are closed on Sundays. Those restaurants are also distinguished from other fast food options by careful processes of ordering and food delivery, franchises that are generously staffed by mannerly and well dressed table jockeys, and fastidiously clean buildings often located on busy and brightly appointed suburban thoroughfares. More than any other fast food chain, it seems to me Chick-fil-A was ready to pivot to the public health precautions necessary in the past year. Just check out that Chick-fil-A off Eubanks road near the church. The lines are always long at the drive-thru, where they have deployed teams of outdoor sales people to take orders, monitor the queue, direct traffic, and hustle food out to the cars. Even on the coldest, windiest, rainiest day, there are Chick-fil-A people out there dressed for the weather standing under awnings and tents keeping the line moving. Now I'm not going to comment on the politics of supporting an evangelical brand or other important considerations like wages and tips or how companies treat their laborers. All I'm saying is that after a whole year of practice there is one company that has figured out how to help everyone find their place in line. I have wondered if we might have achieved by now herd immunity if only Chick-fil-A distributed the vaccine rather than Walgreens.

Of course we are all doing our best to find our place in a line that has taken the shape of a disturbed ant colony. Discovering who belongs in which vaccine group involves skilled research. One you know where you belong and that your vaccine group is open, making an appointment requires persistent phone or internet contact. All of that is inconvenient but manageable for most of us, but goodness knows the inequities are baffling and we're all wrestling with certain ethical questions. Should one go to another county to receive the vaccine? Should I accept the vaccine if it's offered to me? Do I really belong in the group I think I belong to? The process isn't orderly or even entirely clear - and we can sense the consequences in the frustration of those trying use the system and the exclusion of those who can't access the system at all.

The clarity and order of the Biblical law sounds especially attractive to us today. "I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other Gods before me." Delivered from the mountaintop, inscribed on stone tablets, these Ten Commandments are clear and understandable to all - perhaps deceptively so. "You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not covet your neighbor's house." When I think about the Ten Commandments, I actually think about the first chapters of the book of Genesis - you know, when God created the heavens and the earth in seven days, and put everything in balance with other things, all things having a proper place. God has put everything in order. Likewise, here God's attention has turned from creating to organizing. The biblical law reflects God putting human society in order as God had earlier ordered the cosmos.

I say this law might be deceptive in its simplicity of course because there are so many questions it does not address or leaves unanswered. You can easily find granular legal codes in the Bible that don't leave you wondering exactly what might constitute something like idolatry or covetousness. But the purpose of the Ten Commandments is not to establish law that would hold up in court or even to answer our ethical questions. No, this is about God who loves Creation enough to give us order and structure to our life together. In the Ten Commandments, God establishes some priorities. Think of the Ten Commandments like this: Every mother of children has to keep some basic order in her home. So when friends come over to play a mother will patiently explain - "These are the rules of the house." Shoes off at the front door. No jumping on the beds. Snacktime at 2 - don't be expecting it if you're late. The Ten Commandments are mother's house rules. Now there are a lot of questions you may have that Mother's House Rules will not answer. But these house rules are a sign of Mother's love, Mother who loves us enough to teach us how to live together and show us how to care for what we have.

We only have to contemplate the confusion of a crisis to remember how grateful we are for the basic order that God gives us. The past year has so disrupted the basic order of our lives. We have been working from home. Children spending their days out of school. So many people who have lost their jobs. So many who have been sick. Our systems of transportation and commerce brought to a standstill. Even the most privileged and secure people in our communities have been shaken with vulnerability that they are unaccustomed to feeling. In all this disorder it is a small wonder that we can't so much as form a line.

The Biblical law comes to us now as a sign of God's faithfulness and care. In the disorder of our experience we remember the sure foundation that God has given us. We recall the consistency and care of Mother's House Rules. So much around us and in us is ever changing but God's faithfulness stays the same. So while we're on the subject of forming lines to keep ourselves organized. While we're waiting for this vaccine. Here are a few priorities to keep in mind.

Worship God. Worship nothing but God. Worship God with your whole heart, soul, strength, and mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. Loving your neighbor may be as simple as helping them find their spot in line.

This is the basic order of things: to worship God and love our neighbors. This is how we fall in line. It is an everlasting and unchanging law. That's why Jesus has called it the greatest commandment.

Yes, Mother. When we hear the house rules, we may only strive for perfect obedience.
Amen.