

Sometimes You Have to Break the Rules
Sunday, August 22, 2021, 11:15 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

The scholar asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

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If you could be at any concert or performance in your lifetime, what would you choose?

The Beatles at Shea Stadium?

Pink Floyd doing The Wall at the Berlin Wall?

Coachella with Beyonce in 2018

The Monterrey Pop Festival with Janis Joplin

Woodstock

Would it be the 1969 Harlem Cultural Festival that's featured in Summer of Soul - Stevie Wonder, Nina Simone, Sly & the Family Stone, Gladys Knight & the Pips, Mahalia Jackson, B.B. King, The 5th Dimension .. Clara Williams.

That would be pretty awesome.

But no, for me, I know my answer.

For me, it would be July 13, 1985 – Wembley Stadium. Live Aid. 1.9 billion people – 40 percent of the world's population watching. \$127 million raised for famine relief in Ethiopia.

And the lineup ... a little light on women but still incredible ... David Bowie, Elvis Costello, Sting, Elton John, The Who, Paul McCartney, Freddie Mercury and Queen leading all 72,000 people in singing Radio Gaga. 72,000 people clapping their hands over their head in unison. What it would have been like to be there.

But for me ... I would want to have been there for one moment.

Live Aid was a lot of things, but one of them was it was the global coming out party for an Irish band called U2. Maybe you've heard of them. And I'd want to be there to witness one moment.

First we've gotta set the stage ... U2 was just getting started. They had just charted their first top 40 hit. Getting invited to Live Aid was huge. This could make them global rock stars. So, this was high pressure. Career make or break. Not only did they have to give their best performance, nothing could go wrong.

Now, Live Aid was rigidly timed. Bands were given a window and they had to stick to it exactly. This was global television. It could not run over. They had time to run on the stage, do three songs and run off. They were going to start with Sunday, Bloody Sunday move into Bad ... and then end with their signature piece, their top 40 hit "Pride (in the name of love)."

It started out pretty well. Jack Nicholson introduced them ... I mean, how cool is that. They did Sunday, Bloody Sunday and the crowd was into it, but it still felt a little flat. Then they started Bad.

Now if you don't know U2, Bad is this transcendent ballad written about the plague of heroin addiction in Dublin in the early 80s. It's got this beautiful guitar riff that Edge came up with that just runs through the entire song.

So, they launch into it, and it's going pretty well. But it still isn't feeling right. And Bono, the lead singer ... in the middle of singing this song ... he has an epiphany.

This is not just a concert.

This is the whole world coming together in LOVE.

And people aren't just listening to it.

They are watching it. All over the world.

There needs to be an iconic image ... an image that can connect with people wherever they are on the planet.

An image that transcends language and culture ... one that matches or even exceeds the music's power to help the world understand it can come together in love to heal people on this planet who are dying.

An image that will not only make them remember U2 but help us all remember who we are, who we all can be.

So right in the middle of the song, this song about the power of addiction, the power of feeling like you can't break free from what is binding you.

Right when the lyrics are pleading for liberation ... for letting go of desperation and dislocation, separation and isolation ... right then, Bono drops the mic and while the band continues to play, he runs off the stage.

And he runs down some ramps in front of the stage and then he jumps off them so he is at crowd level ... and he sees a young girl, 15 year old Kal Khalique, and she is being crushed by the crowd. I mean, she said later she was at the point where she was suffocating. And he frantically motions for the security guards to help her and bring over the barriers to where he was standing.

And as she collapses into him,

...he takes her hand in his

...and to the music of Edge's guitar riff,

...with nearly 2 billion people watching,

...this white skinned Irish singer and this brown-skinned British Bangladeshi girl close their eyes and, cheek to cheek, slowly begin to dance.

It was the image of God's safe love. Of reaching across barriers to touch each other, to hold each other. For the briefest of moments, it was like the world stopped and watched them dance.

And it became one of the iconic images of what at the time was the largest shared experience this planet had ever had.

But the rest of the band ... didn't know this.

The cameras followed Bono as he left the stage ... so the 72,000 people in Wembley Stadium could see on the giant screens what he was doing ... but the band couldn't. They just knew that Bono had disappeared and that something was going on ... and so they just stood there playing the same riff on a loop over and over and over again wondering what in the world was going on.

Because remember, this was rigidly timed ... they were not allowed to do this. They had to run on, play three songs and run off. By the time Bono got back on stage to finish Bad, he had been gone five minutes and the crew was yelling at the band to get off the stage NOW, so they wrapped up the song and ran off never having played their big finale, their top 40 hit.

Now, later people would say it was genius. The image of Bono and Kal dancing became one of the most memorable images of one of the most memorable days in rock history. But at that moment, all they knew was that Bono had cost them a chance to play their big hit. And so, the

band was furious at Bono. All he had to do was follow the rules. He had put them in a terrible position. Put their biggest break, the whole band's future on the line and they thought he had absolutely blown it.

And they had a point.

He had absolutely left them hanging. And he apologized. He had just had a deep sense that while rules are really important, this was one of those moments where the rules didn't work anymore. They didn't serve the larger purpose of what was most important. That this was a moment that called for something that is never about rules. An iconic image, a pure gesture of love.

Sometimes you have to break the rules.

Sometimes you have to realize the rules are holding us in fear rather than setting us free.

Sometimes you have to just say to hell with everything else, the only thing that matters ... is love.

Now, one of the biblical scholars came near and asked Jesus, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

We know this Gospel story. It's like the Jeopardy question we can give before anyone hits the buzzer.

"What is 'love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself?'"

We know this.

And ... let's dive into this a little bit.

The scholar is asking Jesus about the 10 commandments. The 10 commandments were given to the people of Israel in the desert after they had escaped enslavement in Egypt. God gave them to the people because they needed a basis for how they were going to live together and be faithful to God's liberating love.

In Egypt, they didn't need the 10 commandments because there were other rules. Pharaoh's rules:

Work until you drop because what matters is how much you can produce.

What matters is how much wealth you can generate for someone else.

What matters is that you keep working and working and working.

You are not a beloved human being made in God's image, you are the means of production.

What matters is you following the rules to maximize your productivity.

That is the world that God liberated the people from, which is why when God gave the commandments to Moses, the first commandment starts with a preamble: "I am the Holy One who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery."

Remember, God is saying, that I brought you OUT of slavery. You are meant for liberation. Your God is not Pharaoh. Your God is the God of freedom. So don't let that God of enslavement, that God of wealth generation, that God of work until you drop sneak back in.

Remember you are made for freedom.

Remember you are made for love.

The 10 commandments were meant to be a framework to keep the people free. To begin a new society where the only rule was the rule of love.

And ... we humans are a troublesome and pesky lot.

Love is hard because love doesn't follow the rules of Pharaoh, the rules of Empire. And those are the rules we are so used to following.

Love is unpredictable and chaotic. We want more control than that.

And so, the people began to wonder – maybe not even consciously – maybe the problem with Egypt wasn't Pharaoh's rules ... it was that Pharaoh was in charge.

Maybe those rules wouldn't be so bad if we could be Pharaoh.

So slowly, over generations, the religious leaders of the people made more and more rules, and used those rules to control the people ... and generate more and more wealth for themselves.

And then when other nations came in and occupied their land, those nations used those leaders and those rules to control and oppress the people. And even though the commandments of the God of liberation and love were still on their lips, they were back in Pharaoh's Egypt.

And that's where Jesus comes in. Jesus is saying something revolutionary here ... something that topples the system of Pharaoh that has re-emerged in the guise of the Temple of the God of liberation and love. Jesus is saying something revolutionary here ... but he is not saying anything new.

When Jesus says: *“Hear, O Israel: the Holy One our God, the Holy is one; you shall love the Holy One your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”* And *‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*”

When Jesus says these words, he is dropping the mic and changing the song.

When Jesus says these words, he is saying you’ve got to look at who the rules serve. Do they serve us being the holy, healthy people God dreams for us to be ... or do they serve the enslavement God longs for our freedom from?

When Jesus says these words, he is saying:

Sometimes you have to break the rules.

Sometimes you have to realize the rules are holding us in fear rather than setting us free.

Sometimes you have to just say to hell with everything else, the only thing that matters ... is love. And that’s the way we need to live.

For nearly 2000 years, we as the church have done with these words of Jesus what the religious leaders did with the commandments of our God of liberation and love. We have created a church that mirrors society in demanding production for production’s sake. That says if you want to be great, build up those ABC’s of Empire: “attendance, buildings and cash.”

And that church has done some wonderful things. The rules can work well sometimes. We need good rules and boundaries – ones that serve us being the holy, healthy people God dreams for us to be. Rules and expectations that keep us safe and call us to our best selves and that ensure everyone has a voice and nobody gets left behind.

Live Aid had a lot of amazing performances because the rules helped an incredibly complex day flow really, really well.

And ... no matter how wonderful the product, we are more than producers. There is more to life than maximizing our productivity.

You are, I am, we are beautiful images of the God of liberation and love.

Yes, we can produce beautiful things.

We can be a great community.

We can be a thriving community.

We can be a community God uses to transform and heal ourselves and the world

... but not at the cost of our souls.

We are in the desert just as much as those people of Israel were. We are in a holy in-between time, unsure of our very survival, the memories of the way we have lived in the past so strong that we are tempted to return to them if for no other reason than they are familiar and secure, even if they truly were killing us.

We can even glorify them with nostalgia, remembering the wonderful food of Egypt and forgetting how stressed, tired, oppressed and beaten up we were by the way we used to live.

We are in a holy in-between time as we hope this pandemic may be slowly ending and we are entering into and creating together whatever is coming next.

We are on the stage and the crew who is putting on the show is screaming at us to just follow the rules, get to work, keep working, produce what you are supposed to produce, let's raise the money because maybe it's even for a really good cause.

The stakes seem incredibly high. Success or failure. Maybe even life or death. And that makes us afraid Of course it does. We wouldn't be human if it didn't. We feel like there is so much we *have* to do. And we forget to question that.

And it is in this moment that the Christ reminds us that, like Jesus, we too are revolutionaries. And our cry is love.

Just love.

Love God.

Love each other.

Love ourselves.

We are wounded. We are grieving. Our eyes are filled with tears and our fists are clenched in rage. I know you see it. I know you feel it. And we are being told the answer is to follow the rules, to live up to the expectations, to get back to work, the show must go on ... same as it ever was... same as it ever was.

But the rules and expectations will not save us, and they will not heal us. The rules and expectations will just continue to imprison us.

Sometimes we have to break the rules.

Sometimes we have to realize the rules are holding us in fear rather than setting us free.

Sometimes we have to just say to hell with everything else, the only thing that matters ... is love. And that is how we need to live.

As we move through the coming months, I know we want things to return to normal – whatever that is. I know there are so many things that we have missed about our life together. So much has changed and is continuing to change, we just want the world and the All Saints we used to have back. Because this All Saints made us feel so good about ourselves ... and with good reason.

And ... we have to resist that temptation. We cannot let the memory of the way things used to be become our God. Because if we do, we will become enslaved to its production, we will never heal and we will never be free.

This is one of those moments where we have to break the rules. Where we have to let go of the expectations.

This is one of those moments where we have to realize the rules and expectations are holding us in fear rather than setting us free.

This is one of those moments where we have to just say to hell with everything else, the only thing that matters ... is love. And that is how we get to live.

What does that look like for us?

I have NO idea.

...but I want to find out.

And I want to find out together.

I want us to sing together.

Laugh together.

Grieve together and rage together.

I want us to wade out into the crowds and find the person who is saying, "I can't breathe" and find a way to hold each other and close our eyes, and slowly begin to dance.

And I want us to do it all not burdened by the fear that we aren't producing enough, or working hard enough, or doing enough things. The fear that somehow our worthiness and loveability is tied up in those things and not in our simple creation and existence as God's beloved children.

We can break free.

We can let go of our desperation and dislocation.

We can let go separation and isolation.

We can let it go, and we can be the image of God's safe love. Of reaching across barriers to hold each other.

We can break free of the expectations and the rules that bind us.

We can have that kind of vision.

We can have that kind of courage.

And maybe, even for the briefest of moments the world will stop ... and watch us dance ... and know that love can heal us all.

Amen.