

What is expected?

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying:  
Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel  
and say to them:  
‘You shall...’”

“You shall...”.  
These are the things expected of us.  
The things we shall do.

Some of these we take for granted  
and we perform pretty well,  
most all the time.

“You shall not steal.”  
A car,  
a pack of gum at the register.  
Most of us don’t go around taking what isn’t ours.

But there’s more.  
Things that sound strange to us.  
And I wonder if it’s all just ancient nonsense.

“When you reap the harvest,  
 you shall not reap to the very edges of your field...  
 You shall not strip your vineyard bare...  
 you shall leave them for the poor and the alien:  
 I am the LORD your God.”

What kind of a requirement is that?

A promise that,  
 even with what is ours,  
 even with OUR fields,  
 we will not harvest to the very edges?

That’s not good business.  
 The wheat grows to the edges,  
 the grapes are plump from bottom to top.  
 “You shall not strip (them) bare...  
 you shall leave them for the poor and the alien.”

God’s economy does not exist for shareholders or investors.  
 God’s economy is frighteningly different from our own.

“You shall not steal;  
 you shall not deal falsely;  
 and you shall not lie to one another.”  
 Ok, hard to do,  
 but not unexpected.

But God offers not just the rule,  
 but also the reason why.

“You shall not profane the name of your God:  
 I am the LORD.”

Every false dealing,  
 every unkind word,  
 every deceit  
 is an insult to the God who made us,  
 who gave us the breath to speak in the first place.

It's already too much,  
but... there's more.

“You shall not render an unjust judgement;  
you shall not be partial to the poor  
or defer to the great:  
with justice you shall judge your neighbor.  
You shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor:  
I am the LORD.”

Justice sounds good.  
Impartial judgement sounds better.

But what happens when we get the preferential treatment?  
What happens when partiality comes our way?

I can't think of the last time the patrolman pulled me over  
and I asked for a ticket  
instead of a warning.

What happens when things are getting better for us,  
but worse for those around us?  
What profit do we make  
from the blood of our neighbors?

I don't want to think about that!  
Nobody does.

But God is asking us  
to at least hold open the possibility  
that we aren't always getting it right  
all the time:  
as people,  
as a community,  
as a society.

To wonder at how we could live a little closer  
to what the LORD expects of us.

Remember,  
     justice sounds good.  
 Remember too  
     that inequality is injustice:  
         “You shall not profit from the blood of your neighbor.”

    Inequality is injustice:  
         economic disparities,  
         racial divides:  
             these things are sin,  
                 wherever they exist,  
                 sin.

And sin is what moves us further  
     from the God who made us.  
         Justice,  
         righteousness,  
             will bring us closer to God,  
             even as they move us closer to one another.

It's too much.  
     If I've got to try to DO all the right things,  
         at least I can complain about it on the inside, right?

        “You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin...  
         you shall not take vengeance  
             or bear a grudge against any of your people,  
         but you shall love your neighbor as yourself:  
             I am the LORD.

Come on now.

That's impossible.

I'm done.

That is a bunch of ancient,  
Old Testament nonsense.

Ain't nobody can live up to that.

Thank goodness we have Jesus.

Maybe there's something in the New Testament,  
anything that will make me feel a little better today.

Let's see, "Jesus said,

'You have heard it said,

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

But I say to you,

do not resist an evildoer.

But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek,

turn the other also...

and go also the second mile.

You have heard it said,

'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

But I say to you,

Love your enemies

and pray for those who persecute you."

I was wrong.

It's worse.

So much worse.

I thought Jesus was supposed to be easier to deal with  
than that Old Testament God.

Instead,

he wants me to go the extra mile.

It's a dangerous thing,  
 to find ourselves in church.  
     Hearing the expectations  
       of the God who made us.  
 Hearing that God is asking us  
     to take frightening risks for the sake of his love.  
 Hearing that our safety and security  
     are not the top priorities in the kingdom.

    Thank you for being here.  
     Thank you for showing up.  
 I don't like hearing this stuff any more than you do,  
     but I sure couldn't hear it without you.

In a few minutes we will invite a little baby into this world of expectations.  
     Which is probably about the way that it should be.  
     After all,  
         babies can't do anything  
             but live up to what's expected of them.  
 They're supposed to cry;  
 they're supposed to be selfish;  
 they're supposed to wear us out.  
     And in return,  
         they are cuter than they have a right to be!

        But we better be there for them.  
         We better show them what it looks like  
             to love the stranger,  
             to love our neighbors,  
             to go the extra mile.  
 If we are going to invite these little babies into this church,  
     we're all going to have to promise  
         to walk that extra mile with them,  
             even when it means picking up a cross.

Jesus never made it easy on anybody.  
Even the ones who followed him around  
didn't much understand what he was talking about.  
First they picked up swords  
and then they scattered like chickens.

But they kept showing back up.  
At first in a locked room.  
And then at the tomb where they'd laid him.

And they couldn't recognize him,  
even when he was right in front of them.  
Mistaking him for the gardener,  
or just a fellow traveller along the road.

It's never been easy to follow Jesus.  
It's so easy to lose our way.

All this stuff that Jesus said  
it's just so hard,  
impossible really.

But you know,  
Jesus said other things too.  
Not just, "love your enemies",  
but "love the son who comes back  
after doing no good."  
Love the one who was lost  
and gets found.

He never made it easy  
and it seems like we are bound to lose our way.

But he talked,  
if I can just remember,  
he talked about a shepherd  
who goes out looking,  
not for the whole flock,  
but just for the one sheep that lost his way.

And somewhere,  
I'm sure he said,  
"I am the good shepherd."

Come on now.  
That's impossible.  
Ain't nobody can live up to that.

Thank goodness we have Jesus...