

Rule 1 -- Easter 5C

Back in Connecticut, where I spent many happy years, there was an odd, quirky and utterly unique grocery store called Stew Leonard's.

Started by a former milkman, and still operated by his descendants, Stew's calls itself "The World's Largest Dairy Store." There is an outdoor zoo, a costumed mascot, and great big enthusiastic signs all around telling you about what's on special. The formula is that everything is on special, and costs less the more you buy. The food is very high quality, but the selection and the shelving are limited – you navigate your cart among pallets and puppet shows that keep kids entertained, and a lot of the infrastructure – baking, cooking, even milk carton filling and sealing, is visible to the customer. You have to see it to believe it.

One of my favorite things about Stew's is in the entranceway. Everyone pushes from the parking lot past an enormous boulder -- about SmartCar size – into which is carved the philosophy of the store's founder. Rule 1: "The Customer is always right." Rule 2: "If the Customer is ever wrong, reread Rule 1."

Now Stew Leonard was probably not the first person to say this – maybe he was – but that boulder is very impressive, and effective. You get the feeling they mean it. And it's simple, clean fun that points us to the absurd persistence of human pride. Because Rule 1 really contains all the information one needs to perform within the philosophy of the founder: "Always." It doesn't say

“Usually,” or “Mostly,” or “The Customer is to be considered right until proven otherwise,” but always right.

And yet, and yet... any of you who have ever been in retail, or service, or had kids, or had parents, or been married – all of us – know, that the customer is occasionally (dare I say frequently?) wrong. There is a wonderful observation: “It is important to remember when dealing with other people that all of us are to some extent emotionally disturbed, frequently wrong and suffering the pains of growing up.”

Stew Leonard, the World’s largest milkman surely knew this when he etched his two rules in stone. And in a family business, accuracy, expertise and accountability to your public are vital, so in the event of a disagreement, chances are the Customer is probably wrong. It would have been clearer to carve: “When the Customer is wrong...” not “If the Customer is ever wrong, reread Rule 1.” “The Customer is always right.” There is just no escaping this rule, much as we might want or deserve to.

It reminds me of the old, slightly risqué’, and thus especially favorite Sunday school song, “Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham (early gender equality) Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham... So high, you can’t get over it; so low, you can’t get under it; so wide, you can’t get around it, you gotta go through the door.” That’s like Rule 1. There is just no escaping this rule. The rule is the door, and we have to go through it.

Today we hear the story of Jesus' preparation for departure from the bosom of his family of friends. "Where I am going you cannot follow..." He is indeed headed, by the most terrible route, to the bosom of Abraham and of God's very self. Jesus has done all the deeds he can do in the life he has been given and he is ready for an end to it. So he gives a one-line capsule summary, an ultra-simple wrap-up speech, the take-home lesson, in the form of a tune for everyone to hum as they spill out of watching the stunning events of his life and into the streets of history.

His lesson: "A new commandment." Notice it isn't a new recommendation, a new suggestion, or even a new admonition, any more than it is recommended that the passengers of a sinking ship get into the lifeboats, or suggested that when you jump out of an airplane you open your parachute. This is not even the serious admonition of your doctor that after your heart attack, you lay off the cigarettes and pork cracklings with mayo. No, this is a commandment, in the sense of "You will do it."

In Islam, there is a marvelous description of the book of deeds that constitutes a life. When anyone dies, their book is closed, except for three things. 1. The righteous prayers of your children are added to your book. 2. Whatever charitable works you have begun, as long as they thrive, their activities will be added to your story too, and 3. If you have taught someone, anyone, something, anything valuable, as long as your teachings are passed along, the entries in your life book continue to grow.

What a wondrous lens through which to consider the life of Jesus of Nazareth, whose book keeps growing each day as people take this commandment seriously: “Love one another as I have loved you.” As people pray “Take my life and let it be consecrated God to thee!” The commandment is as unmistakable as that motto, etched in stone at the World’s largest dairy store. The customer is always right, even when (especially when) the customer is wrong. Love each other as I have loved you. Notice it says each other. Let us not kid ourselves that each other means us friends only, the members of our inner circle. By each other, Jesus means each other, even when (especially when) difficult, annoying and downright undeserving.

So when Peter starts to take this act on the road, he immediately begins to encounter the difficult, the annoying and especially the undeserving. “Joppa? What is that? That doesn’t sound like our people; we cannot abide them.” This is the response Peter gets from his friends and his fellows when he gets home. “They will not be a part of our way, because they are not of us.” It is a toss-up whether Jesus, observing this from afar is shaking his head with bemused chuckling, or tearing out his hair in frustration. Didn’t he just tell them the one vital rule: love as he loved? And here they are doing just the opposite.

But God’s wisdom is ever as wide as God’s mercy. And when he sends Peter with a heart full of stories to tell, they are stories of the absolute diversity of the faithful, and the absolutely unquestionable authenticity of their experience. Peter’s stories are as indefatigable as that wall around Abraham’s bosom, as inescapable as Stew Leonard’s rule.

Peter spins a series of tales with exotic people and vivid dreams, with such magnificent voices giving such clear instructions, that even his proud and fearful hometown crowd have to give in and say, “Let us praise God for giving the repentance that leads to life, even to the gentiles; to everybody!

It might be a good idea for us to consider the many, many ways we still resist this commandment: reserving our support, withholding our affection and trust, carefully rationing our love. It might dismay us to admit that, even in our Episcopal Church, where diversity and inclusiveness are central motifs, it sometimes looks as though what we’re really saying is that we’re really, really willing and eager to have anybody at all ... do it our way.

Jesus didn’t say that. Jesus said, “Love each other as I have loved you.” Lay down your life so that others may live. Be humbled so that others may flourish. Be a conduit and facilitator of others’ spiritual discovery, not an arbiter and sheriff of their religious behavior.

Oh, but that is a tall order! Let us thank God for the stories and the mysterious Spirit that prove to us that it is possible to pursue, even as we are falling short. And let us give thanks for the Body of Christ that proves to us the possibility, the reality, the certainty of love beyond our own life.