

“Rules of Engagement”

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Mark 12: 28-34 NLT

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Here we are again in Roll up season. It seems like ‘roll up’ is always during Lent, but more likely it’s probably Tim Horton’s encouragement that Spring is on the way. I posted a picture of a roll up cup on Facebook recently with the caption: *“Who needs a groundhog to tell us that spring is coming?”*



There’s something about “roll up the rim” that brings a little excitement...even suspense to the morning coffee ritual. So much so that I usually switch back from MacDonald’s coffee ...that I actually kinda like better!

Living in Prescott now, I find it easy to make a quick stop on the way out to Roebuck United Church on Sunday mornings (where I’ve gone to church all my life) to grab a coffee. Or even stop on the way to Brockville when I come here to Wall Street.

So there I sat comfortably, last spring in Roebuck with my ‘roll up’ cup in hand, as our minister (Rev. Kathy Petrie) spun a story of Seaway Valley Presbyteries refugee family, and how ‘little’ George had yet to win anything in ‘roll up the rim’ and how disappointed he was, and how she was hoping we would all turn in our cups so ‘little’ George would have a better chance of winning, and it seemed like all eyes turned to me...and my cup!

I thought ...hey...that’s not right! That’s not in the rules! This is my cup... and what if it’s the car?? George can’t even drive! This isn’t fair, it’s not the rules of the game. But a little begrudgingly and under much scrutiny I turned my cup over to Rev. Kathy. Good news is that little George did end up winning; maybe not on my cup, but he did win and even a few times.

So let’s play today. I’ve been collecting for a couple of weeks and thanks to Jenn, Trevor, Pastor Kim and a few others, I’ve accumulated 37 unrolled cups for our game today. BUT there’s just one thing! Today we are playing by my rules! All coffee and small food items are yours; but anything bigger comes back to me! Agreed? Let’s roll up the rim! (FYI: We had 6 winners of small items)

Brockville is a curling town. There must be a few curlers or fans in this group? So I wonder what you thought about mixed doubles in Olympic curling? Apparently some love the new format and some hate it. Some say

that this game is nothing like curling. Some think that the rules have been bent too far... that it's sacrilege.

A lot of non-curlers like it because it's faster and every end is exciting. Hey, even Mr. T. loves mixed doubles! All I know is it's a good thing we had this new format because it sure saved us curling fans from total disappointment at this year's Olympics!

What about the new format in the Scotties and Brier? Again some think that it's good because they involve more players and others think it waters down the field. But like it or not, the rules were changed.

Doubles – Curling or Roll up at Wall Street - These are just examples of ways where it's easy to change up or stretch the rules a bit to meet our needs or desires or in an attempt to make things better.

There are a lot of rules in life. When followed, rules are good guidelines to a successful, happy life. Rules are like boundaries of what to do and what not to do; but sometimes we find it hard to follow rules.

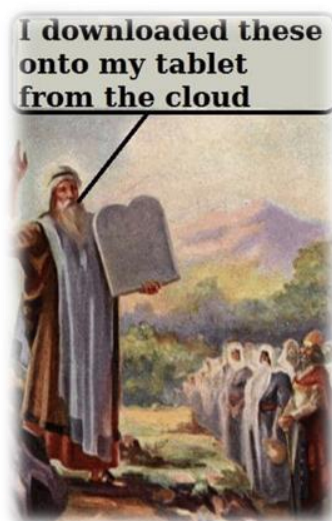
And it's been like that for a very long time; actually all the way back to the Garden of Eden. The only thing Adam had to do in the Garden was to spend quality time with God. And God loved Adam so much that he created a special companion; just for him. The only rule that Adam and Eve had to follow in the garden was to not eat fruit from that one tree; from the tree of good and evil; and we all know how well that worked out!

And what came from their failure? After that God gave over 600 rules to follow; including those famous 10 Commandments given to us through Moses.

How good were our ancestors at following those rules? How good are we at following these rules? Those rules have been bent, stretched or broken since the day Moses brought them down the mountain.

Those rules which are still good goals to work toward; have proven to be too much for mankind. When it comes to those old covenant rules, simply said...we all fail badly.

We thank God for his mercy and undeserved grace toward us. Instead of giving up on us, what did God do? God looked at us with favour and unconditional love and God said: I will send them my Son; giving Jesus the toughest assignment of all - to come to us... the Word made flesh, to live among us, to teach us about God's love and to make the way for us to be reconciled to God; by taking our sin, our faults and our weaknesses on the cross.



Jesus could have bent and stretched those rules of engagement too. In this Lenten season we are reminded that in Jesus short ministry, he was tempted, ridiculed and pressured to change and give up on his God given assignment. We know how he was tempted and goaded by the devil in the desert but he did not waiver. Jesus was pressured and betrayed all the way to the cross, tortured beyond our comprehension; but he did not stray.

Every one of those old, hard to follow old testament laws were based on sacrifice. The only way you could be forgiven for breaking one was to make a sacrificial offering. Because, and only because Jesus did not waiver, he became that ultimate sacrifice for all of our sins. Jesus fulfilled those rules and laws to pay the price for us ... once... for all.

Jesus came to make a new covenant between God and his creations so we could be reconciled to God...so we again could have that intimate relationship with God.

So how can we access that new covenant agreement? How can we enter into that right relationship with God? How can we become best of friends again? And how do we know which rules are the right ones to follow?

In Mark, Chapter 12 we read how Jesus taught that there were only two commands or laws that we need to focus on. Two important rules of engagement to make the way between us and God.

When asked by the Pharisee what is the most important commandment in the Law; Jesus answered: *“you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength. The second is equally important: Love your neighbour as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these.”*



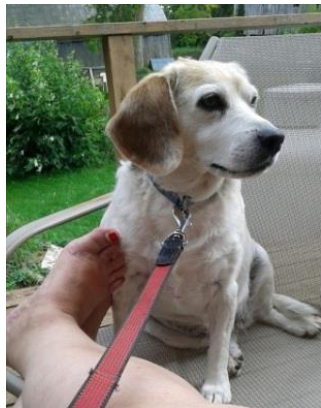
Modern day biblical teacher, Curry Blake says:
“Simply said: Love the Lord, love your neighbour. If we do that we fulfill every other command or rule that was ever given.”

Early last Spring I had an encounter with a homeless man on the main street of Prescott. Not something you see every day in small town, rural Ontario. I was dog sitting for Pastor Kim and out for a walk with Rupert early in the morning, when I saw a man standing alone on the street with a large knapsack nearby. I could tell he wasn't 'from here' and I was kind of leery as he strolled toward me, but I knew Rupert, would give me a true indication of the situation.

For those who don't know Rupert he is a large dog; a standard poodle, and for whatever reason Rupert doesn't always take well to strange men. I've noticed when I have him though, that he seems to have a good sense of when someone is okay or not...if you know what I mean. Well Rupert walked right up to this dark looking character and put his head on his stomach to be petted.



I talked to the stranger for quite a while. He told me he was walking from Toronto and going as far east as he could go; sleeping wherever he can find shelter or in the bushes. We talked about the dangers of ticks. We joked how he wouldn't make it to Newfoundland as he couldn't swim. I apologized for not having money on me and he said he wasn't asking for money; he was just seeing how things worked out. I told him I had to go to get ready for work and I wished him well on his journey.



And then one Saturday last summer, I was walking the other dog I sit for on occasion. If you're around the church during the week you may have met her. This is Casey, my friend's beagle. On our walk, Casey and I came across a woman standing by herself at the end of the harbour in Prescott. She looked out of place just pulling on her hands and walking back and forth. I talked to her as I thought it was her dog running 'off leash' and scaring my elderly, arthritic puppy. She said it wasn't her dog and I carried on.

When I came back I saw she was sitting alone on the bench overlooking the river, with her back to everyone passing by. It entered my mind and I wondered if she was alright? I thought of stopping but also thought that walking on by would be much easier. But God had other ideas. I don't really think I had a choice as my feet just turned in her direction and I walked up to her and asked if she was okay. Her answer was "no".

Long story short she was experiencing some sort of breakdown and had driven her car from Toronto to Prescott the day before until she ran out of gas. She didn't even remember driving here. She had spent the night in the park, had no coat and had not eaten.

I went to get her some food and called my street-wise friend Laura, and our local police. Turned out that she had been reported missing by her family in Toronto. Thankfully with our help and the connections of the caring OPP officer she was taken where she could get the support she needed.

It's times like these when I wonder if God might be checking up on me. I think, what if this man on the street or this troubled woman had been Jesus in disguise? Is God watching me to see how I will treat them?

It's not always easy in this scary world to treat others fairly and without making judgements. But I try to think of what would Jesus have me do?

In the man's case it seemed enough to simply show interest in him and to give him respect. I admit I would have been too scared to offer him a place of shelter in my home, but I didn't ridicule him or run away from him. And I believe our friendly conversation meant something to him.

In the woman's case I wonder what would have happened if I had walked on by? I was overwhelmed how God had used me to help this person in distress. Yes it took a few hours out of my Saturday morning, but in the big scheme of things it was no big deal, and I was grateful to God for leading me to her.

Again a reminder of the simple rules we are to live by:
Love God; love your neighbour...whenever we can, however we can.

Over the last couple of years several hard working and dedicated groups have formed in our area to help bring refugees to the welcome and safety of our country. This work is sometimes painfully slow and frustrating but the groups have been diligent and faithful to the process and they have accomplished many rewarding experiences.

Bringing refugees here is a way of showing that love for our neighbour; and we also show our love of God by serving Him in this way.

And getting them here is only the beginning. Once here the support groups go to work to help them integrate into a new cultural experience and to feel loved and respected in the process.

At Wall Street, your leadership showed love for their new neighbours by agreeing to open this church to the Muslim community for their Ramadan observance of prayers the last 2 years.

And last January when the mass shooting took place in the Mosque in Quebec City our community, including Wall Street Church, held a candlelight vigil in support of the Muslim community and the grief and pain they were feeling. This act of compassion was noticed and appreciated by our new friends. This was our



Facebook post from February 2nd, 2017:

“Wall Street shining some light in the darkness during a combined candle lighting and time of prayer, with a service following on the Court House lawn. Praying for peace and healing after terrorism attack in Quebec.”

Recently we have had several visitors to Wall Street looking for a mosque. Pastor Kim told you recently about a family travelling from Toronto who wanted to stop for prayers. Google told them that our church was the location of the local mosque. We are not sure why? A search of our own told us that the mosque was in the middle of the parking lot across the street behind the old Victoria School? I’m sure that would be a surprise to them too!

I told the family that there was no mosque in our area but that they were welcome to pray here. Trevor our custodian showed them to a quiet space. They were only there about fifteen minutes but they were so grateful!

I’ll always remember the father’s words... “thank you... you made us feel welcome...like family.”



These signs from Refugees4Brockville can be found all around the city.

“No matter where you are from, we are glad you are our neighbour.”

An example of how our community is showing its neighbours signs of love, respect and welcome; and is making a difference.

The rule changes of the Timmies game, or curling game or any other activity we might want to change up to suit us; really doesn’t matter as long as the players agree to the terms ahead of time.

The rules of engagement in life; taught to us by Jesus are a bit more important.

The challenge or mission for us today, in this time of Lent; in this time we spend reflecting on our relationship with God, is to recall and focus on those two rules God has given us...remembering always that:

“No other commandment is greater than these.”

Remembering to love God with all that we have and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

And the light that comes from that love will make our city and our world a brighter, warmer, better place to live.

Thanks be to God. Amen.