
Church of the Beatitudes United Church of Christ

It's the Law in Arizona:
Hunting Camels Is Prohibited

A Sermon by

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

Scripture: Mark 10:2-16

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It's the Law in Arizona: Hunting camels is prohibited.¹

Every state has dumb laws on its books. Perhaps they were not dumb when they were passed, but today we look at them and ask, "Why is hunting camels prohibited in Arizona?" Glad you asked. Well, if you ever saw the 1976 movie *Hawmps* with Slim Pickens, you would know that it was based on the US Camel Corps. As early as 1836, they began to experiment with camels as a means of transport in the dry climate and rough terrain of the southwest United States. By the 1840s, 1850s, they had imported 33 camels and five Arabian drivers from Northern Africa, across the Atlantic Ocean, into Texas, and some eventually into Arizona. The camels were strong and could travel through places that horses could not, but their stubbornness and aggressiveness made them unpopular with the soldiers, and they scared the horses. By the time of the Civil War, the Camel Corps was mostly forgotten. Many of the camels were sold to private owners, and some escaped into the desert and thus needed to be protected. A law was written to prohibit the hunting of camels.²

In Alaska, it is illegal to "occupy a house trailer while it is being moved upon a public street."³ Horses may not be kept in bathtubs in South Carolina.⁴ And in New York, my home state, a person may not walk around on Sundays with an ice cream cone in his/her pocket.⁵

Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce. Jesus in his community seems to be saying that divorce is 'not lawful'. Our laws have embraced divorce, especially in instances of abuse or cruelty. Is it permitted? It is needful? Is it right? Is it just? Those categories may not all mean the same thing.

Are laws made to be broken? Just which ones are we allowed to break? The speed limit? Drinking and driving? Texting while driving? 50 years from now, will they even know why that law was on the books, just like prohibiting the hunting of camels? What about the brilliant new Arizona law of bringing guns into bars?

Laws have contexts. Even the basic Ten Commandments, did not fall out of the sky on stone tablets into Charlton Heston's hands. The Ten Commandments, which if you really read them, are 14 or 15 commandments, and were laws put together to help Moses and his leaders build a just society. Way back in Exodus, Moses had inherited the leadership of all the Israelites, in slavery in Egypt. Moses leads them out of Egypt into the Promised Land, through plagues and a Red Sea, through pillars of clouds and fire. "Let my people go," is his cry to the Pharaoh. And the people are free and now they have to decide how they will live together in freedom. Is it every person for himself/herself? Is it justice for the greatest number? Is it 'welcome', no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey? The same laws the Hebrew people adopted, 'bend the arm', enfold the child, cradle the weak and the vulnerable, are the same laws Muslims embrace from the Qu'ran,

¹ <http://www.dumblaws.com/laws/united-states/arizona>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Camel_Corps

³ <http://www.dumblaws.com/law/1509>

⁴ <http://www.dumblaws.com/laws/united-states/south-carolina>

⁵ <http://www.dumblaws.com/laws/united-states/new-york>

the same laws Christians embrace from the words of Jesus, the short version being ‘love God and your neighbor as yourself’.

That’s the law I choose to use, love God and love your neighbor as yourself. It’s a law I try to follow and it puts me, sometimes, against the laws of the State of Arizona. The State of Arizona tells me that I cannot marry same-sex couples. A law was passed because some people went back to this very text, one man, one woman, and out of all the laws in the New Testament, chose those four words. Never mind all the other laws in that same New Testament, like ‘sell all that you have and give it to the poor’. Maybe that was just a *suggestion* Jesus was making. Never mind the laws about caring for widows and orphans, or not killing, or judging, or hurting children. There are laws we all choose to break, or disregard (remember that speeding one?), or challenge, and this is one: one man, one woman, a law I choose to challenge. While I cannot sign a marriage license for a same-sex, loving, committed relationships, I will *bless* it. I will challenge one man-one woman every chance I get, because I believe in a more just law. Someday, the one man-one woman law will be on the Dumb Laws of Arizona website, and the law that just took away same-sex partner benefits will be there too, because both are based on fear. ‘Same-sex marriages destroy families’ and ‘threaten opposite sex marriages’. What would Jesus do? I think he has told us. Bend the arm. Enfold the vulnerable. Welcome the unwelcome-able. Be as Christ to one another.

The keepers of the Law, the Pharisees, were testing Jesus. The community who followed Jesus’ Way was being tested by the Romans and by the majority of the Jews who wanted nothing to do with this Jesus. Do we welcome the test by the majority culture which constantly seeks to draw lines in the sand, black on one side, white on the other? Do we welcome being the voice that asks, “Why either/or, why not both/and?”

It is probably not in my job description to tell you which laws to break, and which to obey. It is not in my purview to tell you which laws to vote for or against. Unlike some pastors in other congregations, I don’t endorse candidates from the pulpit. But I do think it is in my call to invite you to remember who you are: followers of a Way. A Way that led Jesus to a cross and some thought, the end of the disruption. Yet it turned out to be more than that. It was a cross, a death, that led to a new life. A new life where we remember our Neighbors in Need. A new life where we reach out to our Samoan church here in Phoenix whose family and friends have been devastated back in their homeland by a tsunami. I spoke with the former moderator of our Samoan church here in Phoenix and he said they are just beginning to be in telephone contact again with their island and they appreciated our prayers as they gather in worship this weekend.

We are called to remember that we believe in a new life when we walk for persons living with HIV/AIDS. We believe in a new life where we commit to a life of sharing to our potential, rather than hoarding, laying up treasures, and controlling others by what we refuse to give away. We believe in a new life that went from a table to a cross to a movement. This weekend, Christians around the world eat at a table like this one. Some have a lot. Some have little. All have the faith and the witness and the tenacity to speak in their culture and in their language about a new way of life and living.

So, imagine yourself a lawmaker, a legislator. What laws would you write into the books? What behavior would you prohibit? What would you reward, hope for, long for?

In ancient times, a king had a boulder placed on a roadway. Then he hid himself and watched to see if anyone would remove the rock. Some of the kingdom’s wealthiest merchants and courtiers came

by and simply walked around it. Many loudly blamed the king for not keeping the roads clear, but no one did anything about getting the big stone out of the way. Then a peasant came along, carrying a load of vegetables. On approaching the rock, the peasant laid down his burden and tried to move the stone to the side of the road. After much pushing and straining, he finally succeeded. As the peasant picked up his load of vegetables, he noted a purse lying in the road where the boulder had been. The purse contained many gold coins and a note from the king indicating that the gold was for the person who removed the boulder from the roadway. The peasant learned what many others never understood: Every obstacle presents an opportunity to improve one's condition.⁶

Collectively, we can create a loving world, perhaps not by passing more and more laws, but by a persistent, repeated effort: a unity of Spirit, Christ's Spirit, a love for one another, Christ's love, a tender hearted and humble mind, the mind of Christ. Not a onetime shot like you are going to get for the flu, today or tomorrow. Persistent. Repeated. Effort. Amen.

⁶ <http://soulpurposeliving.blogspot.com/2009/04/creating-loving-world.html>