

Welcome

In 2012, Beaumont, TX resident Floyd Carrier went to his local polling place to cast his ballot. For every election for the last fifty years - basically ever since he retired from the Army, Carrier had shown his Veterans Administration card to vote.

But on that day in 2012, Carrier was turned away from the polls, disallowed from casting his vote thanks to a 2011 law that restricted acceptable voter IDs to seven forms of picture identification.

Carrier left that day heartbroken. He said, "I wasn't a citizen no more. I wasn't."

The law that prevented Carrier from casting his vote was Texas Senate Bill 14. In the years since it was passed, multiple federal judges have ruled that it violates the fifteenth amendment, which prohibits denying people the right to vote based on race.

This is what makes voting laws tricky: They're never *explicitly* biased. To determine their racial impact, we have to look at who they *impact* the most.

For instance, the 7 IDs allowed by SB-14 are forms of ID that White Americans are more likely to apply for and carry - like gun licenses.

Or take polling places: since 2013, Texas leads the nation in shutting down polling sites. What's the big deal? Fewer polling sites means longer lines. In a Houston primary earlier this year, voters waited more than six hours - and well into the night - for the chance to cast a ballot.

Again, in Texas, this is racialized: we've closed 750 polling places, and more than 500 of those have been in counties that are majority non-White or counties whose non-White populations are fastest growing.

Making it hard for people to vote is called Voter Suppression, and it's an old practice in the US that's alive and well here in our state. Voter suppression is an example of unfair rules.

The question I want to ask today is, "How ought the Church respond to unjust rules?" Do we have a role to play at all? Or is this a civic matter that faith doesn't engage?

But rather than begin with American laws, we're going to ask how Jesus understands rules, and then turn to apply that to the rules of our democracy. What does it look like for us to be faith-filled participants in the nation where God has planted us?

Message

For the month of September, we're exploring Race in America. This is a complicated, fraught issue, and it's one that, if we want to take it seriously, doesn't flow immediately from Scripture. We're framing race as more than just individual prejudice. Race is a social category created in the sixteenth century to justify the exploitation of one group over another.

This is why talking about Race and the Bible can be so tricky. The category of Race didn't exist in Biblical times. That's not to say people weren't prejudiced or bigoted - we'll see in today's Scripture they were. They just didn't divide people along lines of Race. So of course, the Bible doesn't talk about race (in the same way the Bible doesn't talk about communism or capitalism, or cell phones and internet). These are all ideas and technologies that were invented centuries after the canon of Scripture was closed.

But of course that *doesn't* mean Christians can't be wise about Race. Just like we can be wise about economics and modern technology.

We're explore systematic racism. Since systems are hard for us to get our minds around, we're going to lean on the work of Andy Crouch, who writes about the nature of institutions in his excellent book *Playing God*. Andy identifies four aspects of institutions that help us understand how systems function.

So to help us out, we're going to think about the institution of football. Andy invites us to consider **1. Artefacts**, **2. Arenas**, **3. Rules** and **4. Roles**. During this series, we're exploring each of these four components of American institutions and ask: how has each been formed by the category of Race? Because Race is an inherently oppressive category (remember, it was created to justify some humans owning other humans), we're going to explore what it looks like for us as a people of faith to engage these components as a people formed by God for justice for all.

We began with artefacts. We saw that the physical components of our culture tell a story, and God expects us to be thoughtful and intentional about the KIND of story we're telling.

Last week, we explored arenas - the spaces in which we live together. By doing a deep dive into the suburbs - the space where we live and worship, we saw how arenas in our country are racialized.

Today, we're exploring rules. Every system has rules that make the system run. They can be official or unofficial - spoken and written or implied. That goes for sporting institutions like football and baseball to family systems to churches to governments.

Before we circle back around to the rules governing voting rights, I want to explore how Jesus understood the purpose of rules.

It's easy for us to fall into a false dichotomy - maybe you've heard people say they prefer a relationship over religion, as though religion is all rules while relationships are dynamic and alive. Jesus, in this dichotomy, represents relationship. We imagine Jesus came to set us free from rules-based religion.

But the early church didn't see Jesus that way at all. Jesus taught them that the *measure* of whether we're following God's rules well isn't how we feel. It's the health of those on the margins. In Jesus' day it was the poor, especially widows and orphans. In a sermon that was probably written by Jesus' brother

James, the preacher says, "Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you. -- James 1:27"

Jesus understands the purpose of God's laws to be guiding us into living together justly. Jesus expects us to act out God's kingdom in our midst, wherever we are.

For Jesus, Just laws ensure the most vulnerable in our community have the same chance to flourish as the most powerful.

[Scripture Slide] This is why Jesus reserves his harshest words not for the people we'd call 'rulebreakers' or sinners, but the people who follow letter of the rules while abusing the Spirit behind them. You might remember that last week, Jesus had a confrontation with a Pharisee named Simon who hosted Jesus at a meal, but denied him hospitality.

You'd think the Pharisees would have quit inviting Jesus to meals after that exchange, but a few chapters later, in Luke 11, they hosted him again. Unlike the first time, here Jesus deliberately provokes the Pharisees. You'll notice he foregoes the ritual handwashing they did before each meal. It wasn't a written law; the ritual handwashing was one of those unwritten rules. Watch how Jesus used this small breach of social etiquette to force a larger conversation about how the leaders of his day abused the law:

As Jesus was speaking, one of the Pharisees invited him home for a meal. So he went in and took his place at the table. His host was amazed to see that he sat down to eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony required by Jewish custom. Then the Lord said to him, "You Pharisees are so careful to clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside you are filthy—full of greed and wickedness! Fools! Didn't God make the inside as well as the outside? So clean the inside by giving gifts to the poor, and you will be clean all over.

"What sorrow awaits you Pharisees! For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore justice and the love of God. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things.

"What sorrow awaits you Pharisees! For you love to sit in the seats of honor in the synagogues and receive respectful greetings as you walk in the marketplaces. Yes, what sorrow awaits you! For you are like hidden graves in a field. People walk over them without knowing the corruption they are stepping on."

You are like hidden graves - no one can tell from looking at you that what's inside your heart is nothing but death. Wow.

I love what happens next: it's classic understatement.

“Teacher,” said an expert in religious law, “you have insulted us, too, in what you just said.”

“Yes,” said Jesus, “what sorrow also awaits you experts in religious law! For you crush people with unbearable demands, and you never lift a finger to ease the burden. -- Luke 11:37-46

What sorrow all these religious leaders and lawyers. Why? Not because they're not following the law. Quite the opposite. Jesus practically commends them for how carefully they fulfill the law. They even tithe on their little herb gardens! That's some careful, attentive rule-following there.

No, Jesus condemns them because they follow the law as a way to avoid having to fulfill the law. The use the letter of the law to circumvent the spirit of the law. And how can Jesus tell? Because of the state of the vulnerable. He says, "You crush people with unbearable demands, and you never lift a finger to help."

You *create* problems for the most vulnerable. And then you do nothing to help them. Instead, you build up your own power and position.

You exploit the law for your own ends.

Friends, as I was studying for this sermon, when I read this passage, I was struck immediately. Because this is exactly the evil logic behind voter suppression.

Our country has been on a trajectory toward everyone voting. When we formed as a nation, only White males who owned land could vote. Women, persons of Color and the poor were barred from the polls. A series of amendments changed that - the 15th prohibited discrimination based on race, the 19th on gender and the 24th ensured you don't have to pay to vote.

But in the wake of the 15th, lawmakers in Mississippi passed the "Mississippi Plan", a web of poll taxes, literacy tests and more aimed at racial discrimination. Lawmakers across the South rushed to pass their own versions. When Virginia representative Carter Glass championed a bill that would "**discriminate to the very extremity... [permissible under] the Federal Constitution, with a view to the elimination of every negro voter who can be gotten rid of, legally, without materially impairing the numerical strength of the white electorate.**"

Do you hear his boast? Lawmakers like Glass did everything in their power to fulfill the *letter* of the law while violating the spirit in which it was past.

Now, obviously, Jesus never voted. He never entered into a debate about voting rights. Such ideas and institutions didn't exist in his day. But these tried and true methods of voter suppression are exactly the sort of behavior Jesus names as sinful. They protect the powerful and crush the vulnerable.

Jesus isn't opposed to rules, to laws. Far from it - Jesus encourages us to take serious the laws that point us toward love of God and love of neighbor. Laws that are aligned with God's way in the world.

So when we read, for instance, in the Declaration of Independence that "All men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights," we say, "You know what? Jefferson was on the right track when he wrote that. He was *pointing* toward truth." He needed to go further - it's not just men who are created equal but everyone. And Jefferson was a slaveholder who couldn't bring himself to live out the convictions he penned so eloquently.

But as Christians who live in the US of A, we can see his Declaration as a goal, an aspiration our country has been reaching for ever since 1776. That's why we keep passing amendments to improve it.

But as the Pharisees illustrate, laws only go so far. Because there have *always* been those who are happy to follow the letter of the law while doing everything they can to violate the *spirit* of the law. They look at a legal code that God intends to lead us to love God with all our hearts, minds, self and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves and see only a means to love themselves better.

Or a law that meant to point us toward liberty and justice for all and see only how they can take care of me and mine at the expense of anyone I deem "Other".

For followers of Jesus, our highest law is Love of God and Love of Neighbor.

One thing that means in our time and place is a concern for all those for whom voting is harder than it is for me. After all, if I am to love my neighbor the same way I love myself, surely that extends to the voting booth.

I want to be overly clear here: Jesus followers ought not be *partisan*. If the way we work for voting equality privileges one group of people, one party of voters, then we are doing it wrong. If I want the freedom to vote easily and according to my conscience, then that has to be what I want for my neighbor, regardless of their political leanings.

A particular good of living in the US is that we have a direct voice in our rule-making. Jesus and his followers lived under Roman rule. The Romans didn't care what they wanted, and they had no influence over Rome. Christians throughout history have lived under emperors and monarchs. When rules were unjust, they had no agency to change those laws.

We do, here in the US. We have the ability not only to voice our convictions, but to work to ensure our neighbors do as well. This is a rare privilege in the history of the church, and it's one we ought not take lightly. We know that the rules in our American institutions are not yet just toward all peoples.

As people who follow Jesus, we don't judge the rules of our society on how well they benefit us. That's not what Jesus shows us. We weight laws on how well they empower and protect the most vulnerable among us.

In our country, when we find rules – spoken or unspoken, on the books or not – that are unjust, we have the power to change them. And we have the ability not only to change them, but to work to ensure those who are harmed most by those rules have the ability to make *their* voices heard as well.

As we move into our time of response, I want to invite you to consider this privilege we have, and ask how God wants you to leverage that privilege over the next six weeks.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus gathered us all. At his table, we're all equals.

1. When in the last week have I paid special attention to who in my life is vulnerable?
2. When have I ignored the vulnerable in my life to focus on myself?
3. How in the next week might I be tempted to ignore the vulnerable in my life?
4. How can I work for the good of the vulnerable around me this week?

Assignment + Blessing

What can you do leading up to election day? How can you be a faithful presence for Jesus at the voting booth?