

613 'Can I's'

'Can I, can I, can I....' If you are a parent or spent any time around kids, you have been through this phase with your children. It seems from our youngest days we are hardwired to seek and test the boundaries of what we can and can't do; it's how we learn and grow and how we also get into trouble. It also happens to be the central question behind today's readings and, not coincidentally a key aspect of our communication as children with our Heavenly Father. 'Can I, can I, can I,' and then on top of that add 610 more 'Can I's' and you will have the 613 'Can I's' asked and answered by God the Father for his children in the Old Testament. There are 613 laws comprising the Old Testament law governing every aspect of life. Can I eat this? Can I wear that? Can we plant this? Can we sell that?

We tend to shrug off the Old Testament as dark age writings that we have superseded as modern Christians. If we do, we are dead wrong. The question of 'Can I' was and always will be the central question of our human experience; that's why it was the first question of Adam & Eve, having nothing to do with apples and everything to do with life. Can we have all this God? Can we own it? Can we defend it? Can we destroy it? Can we rule over it like gods? 'Can I' always has and always will be our blessing and our curse, the question which structures our society and highlights its fatal flaws. Two big and complex 'Can I' questions came up in American civil life just this weekend.

One set of questions were these: Can I use weapons of deadly force to defend myself? Can I use military weapons of deadly force to defend myself? Can 18 year-olds or mentally troubled people use military weapons of deadly force to defend themselves? The other set of questions are these: Can I terminate my pregnancy? Can I terminate my pregnancy if I was raped or my baby has severe birth defects? Can I terminate my pregnancy if I'm just not ready for a baby? Can I terminate my pregnancy after 1 month, after 3 months, after 6 months?

The question of 'can I, can we' forms the fabric of our society and highlights its great divisions. It is a question that must be asked and we must all learn to discuss more civilly but in and of itself, it does not provide adequate answers. If 'Can I' is the only and highest question we ask, often fundamentalism follows close behind, be it from the left or from the right. Can we own guns? The liberal fundamentalist answer is no, there must be an absolute legal ban on guns. Can we abort pregnancy? The conservative fundamentalist answer is no, there must be an absolute legal ban on abortion. Yet, even a novice student of history knows that legal bans rarely solve problems. Alcoholism was out of control and ruining lives in mid 19th century america. The government made the sale and consumption of alcohol illegal, and it was a disaster. It made alcoholism worse not better, and it gave birth to a violent black market of organized crime to boot.

But do you know what the most effective large scale treatment of alcoholism has been? It was a movement by a guy named Bill who moved beyond the question of can and can't with alcohol, and started asking the question of should. Step 1: I can't control my alcoholism, but I should. Step 2: My should is powerless in me, but it's made powerful by God. And by God I should, I want to live differently, making amends for everyone I have hurt, becoming all I was called to be.

The question of should, when submitted to God, unlocks the impasse between can and can't. Jesus summed it up in today's reading. The fundamentalists of his time were judging Jesus for healing someone on the Sabbath day of rest. Jesus tells them forget your can and can't, what did God say to you in your scriptures? 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' (Mt 12:7) I hate your elaborate laws, rules and judging of others, I want your hearts, open to me, to your neighbors, even to your enemies. Then they try to trap Jesus in front of people with a gotcha question. 'So Jesus, if these 613 can and can't laws aren't important, what is important to you? Jesus answers, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind...and love your neighbor as yourself.' (Mt 22:37,39)

So then, following Jesus, let's try to put these natural and essential questions of can and can't in their proper place. Let's put them in second place after the higher question of 'Should I' for these are questions of the heart that can only be answered by you and God. When we believe this, we get to the heart of any question in our lives. We get to the heart of issues like abortions and guns. The heart of the matter is that there should be as few of both of them as possible, hundreds of times less than there are now. That's what we should do, and deep down I think everyone knows this. The evil one, however, uses his same old tricks to keeps us fighting and distracted; 'hey who are you to tell me what I can and can't do?' This is a distraction. The direct questions are between God and me and you. What does my God, who hates legalism and loves mercy ask of me? Does God want me to love my position or to love people, even and especially the ones who offend us the most? Let us only look in the mirror when judging our cans and cant's, for that is all we can control, and each of us will answer directly to God. But there is one sacred question beyond can and can't, the question of should which unlocks our full potential as humans and children of a God whose greatest law is love and whose deepest desire is for mercy, now and always; amen.