

THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

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Luke 15:11-32; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23

July 21, 2013

Three years ago the baseball world was met with a moment of heartache. Armando Galarraga was pitching for the Detroit Tigers up in Detroit against the Cleveland Indians. Galarraga was on his way to pitching a perfect game. A perfect game in baseball is when no batter from the opposing team makes it to first base safely. 27 hitters up and 27 hitters down. It is a rare moment in baseball. Only 23 times in 133 years has a perfect game been pitched. No hits, no walks, no errors. 27 hitters up, and 27 hitters down. Armando Galarraga had faced 26 batters and, as they say in baseball, “retired” them all. Only one left. At first base was umpire Jim Joyce, a highly respected umpire with years and years of exceptional work calling balls and strikes, outs and safes. Jason Donald was the 27th hitter of the night and struck a groundball to the second base side of the field which many assumed would be the last out of the game. The ball went deep into the hole, making it a less than routine play. But Miguel Cabrera got the ball to the first baseman in time, by at least a half-step before the runner. In the eyes of most witnessing the event – the culminating out of a perfect game. Everybody saw it. Everybody knew. Everybody except Jim Joyce. And Jim Joyce was the umpire and what Jim Joyce saw was an out. He saw the ball arrive before the runner. And out went his arms. Safe. The Tigers were stunned. The fans were stunned. Manager Jim Leyland was stunned. Armando Galarraga was stunned. A perfect game illegitimately denied. They argued. They begged for the call to be overturned. They looked at the video for proof, and proof was there. They appealed to the Commissioner. Can’t something be done to grant this pitcher what was his due? No. The

rule is the rule. Jim Joyce knew he had made the wrong call. He apologized to the denied pitcher. But once the umpire makes his call, the call stands. Right or wrong. That's the law.

The results though were heartbreaking.

Baseball, like any other sport, or any other game for that matter, maintains itself by virtue of its rules, its laws. The laws are there to make things fair – to prevent any player, any team, from gaining an unfair advantage. Competition remains compelling only when there is some assurance that the rules are the same for everybody. The steroid scandal in baseball has left a pall on the game because it calls into question how level the playing field has been or is even now. No player or team should be left at a disadvantage. It's one thing to feel the pain of losing within the fairness of competition – but it is more than heartbreaking when the law itself puts someone at a disadvantage. Armando Galarraga did everything he was required to do to be listed in the history books – but the law said otherwise.

Any game, any society, any culture has to wrestle with the unintended consequences of the law. Certainly our good country has wrestled with that throughout its history – what are the intended or unintended consequences of the law. Jim Crow laws were the law of many states for a long time – but the law itself was the problem and hearts and lives were broken as a result. Even today, the debate over voting rights and immigration and marriage and *stand your ground* – are struggles to understand how the law should read and how the law should be enforced to give everyone the fairest of advantages.

Certainly the law was at the center of Jesus teaching and ministry. What to do when the law instead of drawing people to God, pushes them away? What to do when the law places some in a place of advantage and privilege – and places others at a disadvantage? What to do when the law – which was intended to provide people a discipline and ritual of life whereby they might experience a deeper communion with God was all of a sudden turned around to be used as a gate, and sometimes a weapon, against those whose lives made it difficult to achieve such discipline and ritual? Jesus was seeing this as the norm of religious life in his day – the law was creating an unlevel playing field. Some were clearly at a disadvantage.

So Scripture tells us the good rabbi took his place, not among the law abiders, but among the lawbreakers. “Tax collectors and sinners,” is what Luke calls them. They were coming near to hear Jesus. Rubbing up against him. Too close for comfort for the umpires, i.e. the Pharisees, who thought they were calling the play. “He hangs out,” they said, ‘with the unclean ones, the sinners, the tax collectors, the disadvantaged, the ones not playing by the rules.’”

“What’s the point of the rules?” Jesus asked. And so he tells some stories, the most famous of which is the story of the father with two sons. And like any father with two sons there are rules. Every child needs rules. And the older son is the son who’s decided to play by the rules and the younger son has chosen not to. He goes outside the rules. He goes outside the family farm. He goes to the far country to make up his own rules. And when he realizes how far he has taken himself away from the ritual and routine of life with his father – he turns to go home. And when he gets home he is the first to say he has

broken the rules – but for the grateful father the rules are beside the point. Time to kill the fatted calf, time to strike up the band. My son was lost and is found, was dead and is alive.

But then there is that elder son who says, “What about the rules?? Don’t we have rules anymore? Don’t we care about the rules?” And the father says, “Son, you’re missing the point. The rules are about us. They are about family. They are about the joy of home. The ritual of relationships. It would break my heart if the rules kept your brother from the joy of home.”

“Oh no,” says the umpire, Pharisee, older brother, “Oh no, we have rules and rules are rules.”

And Jesus says – “The family was not made for the rules, son. The rules were made for the family.”

Did you recall a few years ago a women’s college softball game played between Central Washington and Western Oregon? Two teams competing hard for the conference championship that year. They were in the second game of a doubleheader when Western Oregon star Sara Tucholsky came to the plate. She was a good hitter, but had never before hit a homerun. And then came her moment, with two on she hit one over the fence. In her excitement though as she rounded first base she forgot to touch the bag. The rules say you have to touch the bag. As soon as she went past she remembered so she turned around to go back and touch first. But as she turned her leg did not pivot correctly and before she knew it her knee gave way and she went to the ground with what would later be found to be a torn ACL. In great pain and unable to stand she crawled back to first base. What to do? The manager asked the umpire – what can

we do, she hit a homerun but she can't round the bases? The rules say that if any of her own teammates help her she will be called out. If they replace her with a runner she can only be granted first base because she herself did not round the bases. What to do? That's when Mallory Holtman from Central Washington – the other team – Mallory Holtman who held the record for the most homeruns in the conference, stepped forward to say that there was nothing in the rules that said that players from the opposing team couldn't help her. Couldn't carry her. Couldn't make sure that she got what she deserved. No, said the umpire, there was nothing in the rules that said that the other team couldn't help. And so Mallory and another teammate picked up their opponent and walked her around the diamond leaning over to touch her foot on the bases and bringing her home for what would become the winning run of the game.

There is, you see, the letter of the law and there is the spirit of the law.

It explains, doesn't it, when the apostle writes to those Corinthians – who seem pretty torn up about who's following the rules and who's not following the rules. Who is keeping the law and who is not keeping the law? And it seems they are missing the point. And so Paul says, "To the Jews I became a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak, I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some."

It is the spirit of the law, Paul says. It's the purpose of God ... that all might be drawn into the irresistible grace. The law serves us no good if the law should prevent us from welcoming all into the kingdom of God.

You likely have heard the apocryphal story of the two American GI's in Normandy during World War Two who carried their dead comrade to be buried in a cemetery. They found a cemetery and went to the rectory and asked permission of the Roman Catholic priest to bury him inside the walls of this Catholic cemetery, and the priest said, "Well, you know the rule is that you've got to be Roman Catholic; you've got to be a member of the parish. So I'm sorry. I don't think I can. The rules won't allow it."

The two comrades implored him to change his mind. "It's war time. Can't you make an exception? It would mean so much" "I'm so sorry," the priest said, "the rules are the rules. You are welcome though to bury him outside the fence, just anywhere outside the fence." The two GIs reluctantly dug the grave, said a prayer and buried their comrade. They planned the next day to return to put a marker at the grave.

So the next afternoon they returned and went to the part along the fence where they dug their grave, but they couldn't find it. No grave. They walked all up and down the fence, and they couldn't find where they'd dug the grave! They knew they'd dug it. They walked all around the cemetery, all around that fence, and they couldn't find it!

Finally they went in to see the priest and they said, “Father, forgive us. We were the ones who came yesterday.” and he said, “Oh, yes. I remember.” They said, “Forgive us for bothering you, but we asked for permission to bury our comrade inside the fence, and you said ‘Bury him outside,’ and we did, but we can’t find it. Are we lost? Where is the grave we dug? Do you know what might have happened to it?”

And the priest said, “Oh, yes. I know what happened. I was so upset about your visit yesterday that I spent half the night worrying about what I said to you. And I spent the other half of the night moving the fence.”

There is the law, and then there is the spirit of the law.

Seventeen years another heartbreaking moment flashed before us from the diamond – Hall of Fame second baseman Roberto Alomar, playing for Baltimore, was called out on a third strike by another one of the game’s great umpires John Hirschbeck. It was a bad call and it brought the two men face to face in a verbal battle that we are used to seeing in baseball. But this time something terrible happened – Roberto Alomar – known around the league as being one of the more respectful of players, lost his mind for a moment and did the unthinkable – he spit into the umpire’s face. It was in the baseball world, or in any world, the worst he could have done and it turned the entire baseball world against the star player. It went downhill from there and the two men became the bitterest of enemies. Hirschbeck carried a grudge

against the second baseman for years, but the rules were the rules and there was no obligation on the rule keeper's part to show a shred of grace.

But then one day when Hirschbeck was preparing to umpire another game with Robbie Alomar at second base, he asked a veteran attendant what he thought about Roberto Alomar. The man replied, "He is one of the two nicest men in baseball," he said. "Oh yeah," replied the umpire, "and who's the other?" "You," the man said.

And that was the moment when the rules no longer mattered. The next day Hirschbeck was the second base umpire just behind Roberto Alomar the second baseman. "Hey Robbie," said the umpire, "how you doing?" And with that the floodgates opened and the spirit of the law began to blow. The next day Hirschbeck asked Alomar to come see his family. And the two have since become friends. And when Alomar was voted into the Hall of Fame, it was Hirschbeck who said he was the greatest second baseman he'd ever seen play the game.

"To those under the law I became as one under the law so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak so that I might win the weak."

And yes there is an end to that heartbreaking story of the umpire and the pitcher and the lost perfect game. Umpire Jim Joyce was on rotation the next day to umpire behind home plate and baseball officials said it would be all right if he took a pass and sat out the game out of fear of how he would be treated by the fans. But no, said Joyce, I need to face the music. So as he stepped out of the tunnel he heard something he wasn't expecting to hear. He heard cheers. A couple of boos, but mostly cheers. Applause from the crowd. Word had gotten out about the umpire's remorse. And so there was applause. Now before the game begins there is always the customary meeting of the managers at home plate to exchange their lineup cards. So Umpire Jim Joyce called for the manager to come forward, but out of the Detroit dugout came not the manager, but the pitcher of the night before, Armando Galarraga. He came to shake the umpire's hand. He came to say it was all right.

"How could you do that?" the reporters asked the pitcher after the game. "How could you so graciously extend yourself to someone who took your perfect game away?" To which the pitcher replied, "Perfect? Nobody's perfect."