Emily Boring
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How Do "Rules" Serve You?
Realizing the wholeness of creation

Last summer, I worked as a chaplain on a Burn Intensive Care unit. "Intense" is the right word for it. Patients came in with burns covering 30, 60, 80% of their bodies. Most stayed for nine months or longer, a marathon of endurance and courage and grit.

My first week on the unit, I visited a patient who'd survived a propane tank explosion, leaving his legs, abdomen, neck, and fingers charred. He was drowsy from a cocktail of ketamine and fentanyl, wrapped in layers of seeping gauze. But the moment he saw my nametag—"Emily Boring, Department of Spiritual Care"—his eyes widened, alert and awake.

"You're the chaplain!" he said hoarsely.
"Tell me: why did God do this to me?
Is it because I did drugs?
Is it because I left my first wife?
Is it because I had kids with my girlfriend and didn't get married?
I have to know what I did wrong, because otherwise it might happen again."

Remember, this was my first week as a chaplain intern. Nowhere in the handbook had I found a chapter called, "Dismantling the notion of a transactional God," or "Divine justice: A beginner's guide."

I remember standing in silence, stunned by the magnitude of his questions, wondering what on Earth gave this person the notion that I—a 25-year-old Episcopal chaplain-in-training—might have something useful to say.

But on the other hand, it makes perfect sense that he asked me. I had a nametag, after all—a title that linked me to that institution called "religion," the entity that for centuries has claimed the authority to say what's right and wrong.

Do this, not that, and you'll be rewarded, our scriptures tell us. Eat, dress, behave, build, farm, kill goats, bake bread, sacrifice, and pray this specific way—or else!

Different communities take Biblical law more and less literally, of course. And the ways that Scriptural interpretation gets leveraged for political and personal agendas deserves a sermon all its own.

But the fact remains that we turn to religion for a system of order and meaning. I saw it over and over again last summer, with patients of every faith background and none at all.

In times of crisis and desperation, we want *rules* to explain the unexplainable, to translate tragedy into a neat equations of cause and effect.

Why? Because we sense, as my patient did, that understanding might afford some protection. If we know what to do and not to do, what to seek or avoid, we might stay safe and whole.

It's this understanding of rule-seeking—this acknowledgement of the very natural impulse for self-protection that makes us cling to "laws"—that I want to bring to today's gospel passage.

Like many modern Christians, I find this reading difficult—both its focus on rules, and the verdict that Jesus delivers. Jesus essentially tells us, clearly and unequivocally, "Divorce is unacceptable. Moses might have allowed it, but I'm saying differently. It's not okay to separate what God has joined as one."

This is the place where I could argue, as many scholars do, that we can rescue this passage on the basis of "cultural historical context." Marriage, in the ancient world, was the primary route to economic and social stability. For most women, survival depended on being a wife. Indeed, in this passage, Jesus gives women *greater* equality in marital relations than they had in surrounding culture. Men, too, can be held accountable for adultery, he tells us. And women aren't just passive subjects—they can initiate divorce.

In other words, we can read Jesus's rule here as overall progress toward countering the patriarchy—and dismiss the bits we're uncomfortable with as a problem of "different time, different place."

That *is* one way to do it. But I think it's more interesting to focus not on the cultural context that led to Jesus's statement, but the actual grounds on which he makes his claim.

To show why divorce is wrong, Jesus doesn't cite civic law or local custom or even the well-known teachings of Moses. Instead, he turns for authority all the way back to the beginning: Genesis 2, the other passage we read today.

"God made them male and female," Jesus reminds us. "'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, *and the two shall become one flesh*... Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

In other words: God's intention in creation was to form a single unit, a whole human self. In Genesis, wholeness and unity mean the joining of male and female into "one flesh." Therefore, you shall not divorce.

The scope of this claim is important. For Jesus, it's not a matter of contractual obligations or economics or family honor. It's not about human law at all.

Beneath his command is a desire to preserve the vision at the core of God's creation: a vision of union, relationship, and wholeness of self.

Creation becomes an ethical compass, the standard against which human action across time and circumstance must constantly be re-measured and revised.

This is a powerful move to make on Saint Francis Sunday. Francis of Assisi was known for his focus on creation. He believed that nature is a mirror of God, a book through which we can glimpse the imprint of the divine. In many ways, he used creation as a guide for human action. When he looked closely at the natural world around him, Francis found relationship, interconnectedness, and dependency across forms of life. This led him to call all creatures "brothers and sisters," laying the foundation for the Christian environmental ethics we know today.

What if we, too, took Jesus's—and Francis's—move seriously? What if we emphasized not the specific conclusion about divorce in this gospel, but the deeper, creation-centered vision on which it's based?

Humans are part of creation, he tells us, and creation is built on relationship, unity, and wholeness. Across all contexts, we should strive for these qualities, whatever means that takes.

The means may look different than they did in ancient Israel.

For instance, we now know that the language of gender in Genesis—the binary division of male and female—is harmfully reductive, eclipsing the beautiful spectrum that human bodies occupy.

Recognizing the limits of heterosexual marriage, we have cultural language for the countless other forms that "love" and "union" can take.

Most of us have witnessed times when marriage itself becomes the antithesis of wholeness, when the only choice—the choice that truly honors the integrity of each partner—is to let the union go.

By making these claims, are we countering the teaching of today's gospel? Some communities say yes—Jesus meant what he said about divorce literally, and he meant it to hold across space and time.

Others say, as I've suggested, that what matters isn't the *content* of Jesus's conclusion, but the foundation from which he spoke.

Jesus was unafraid to challenge human laws and conventions, drawing on the pattern of creation as authority and guide. Rules are useful insofar as they help us follow his liberatory example, realizing greatest "wholeness" in our own time and place.

I find this perspective personally helpful. It helps me to look at the impulse for rule-following in myself and others with greater compassion, recognizing the desire for wholeness that lives just underneath.

On my first day with that Burn patient, I floundered.

To his question, "Why did God do this to me?", I responded,

"It doesn't work like that! God isn't vengeful or punishing! God is bigger than our systems of right and wrong."

My words, though well-meaning, did little. So eager was I to escape the framework of rules altogether that I failed to acknowledge the fear, the desire, the desperate need for meaning that drove his words.

As the summer wore on, I learned to listen differently. To the question,

"Why did God do this to me? What did I do wrong?",

I began to ask, "Why does it feel important for you to know?"

Nearly always, I found that beneath a patient's desire for clean-cut answers was some version of a longing to be whole. Wholeness of body. Wholeness of mind. Wholeness of relationships, of meaning, of our sense of how the world has always worked.

And slowly, alongside patients, I began think about wholeness differently. I began to see the many forms—unforeseen, paradoxical, surprising—that wholeness can take.

In waiting rooms and pre-op bays,
At deathbeds and on trauma calls,
In those moments when body and mind break down
And all we thought we knew dissolves
And we're forced to admit there may be no reason and no explanation—

Even there, in the chaos and breakdown of order, there is union and relationship. Even there, we can be whole.

That is another sermon. But in closing, I want to leave you with one practical thing.

I want to invite you to take the model of our gospel reading—that move from the content of rules, to the focus on wholeness beneath them—and apply that to your own lives.

Take a moment and call to mind some of the rules you carry.

Ways to speak, dress, look, or love.
Rules about what you must earn, achieve, and prove to maintain your identity.

Where did they come from? From Scripture? From society? From your family of origin, teachers, friends?

Take a moment to welcome these rules with compassion. How have they served you? How have they allowed you to achieve, to survive, to protect?

Then consider: are these rules truly helping you realize your wholeness? Are they helping you claim and express your fullest self—or not?

The answer may be different tomorrow or next week. You may need to return to this question regularly, reconsidering the rules at every stage of your life.

As you do, tread gently. Remember that your longing for wholeness is possible only because some small voice deep inside you recognizes that wholeness is the birthright of your being. In the eyes of our Creator, we are already whole.

Amen.