

3rd Sunday of Lent

On this date in the year 1789, James Madison produced a Preamble that included these words: “RESOLVED by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America, in Congress assembled, two thirds of both Houses concurring, that the following Articles be proposed to the Legislatures of the several States, as amendments to the Constitution of the United States, all, or any of which Articles, when ratified by three fourths of the said Legislatures, to be valid to all intents and purposes, as part of the said Constitution.” Nearly two years after Madison introduced twelve articles, ten of them became amendments. We know them as the Bill of Rights. Americans revere these ten amendments almost as much as Christians and Jews revere the Ten Commandments.

Sports enthusiasts also revere rules. At KU the original 13 rules of Basket Ball are enshrined as if they were an autographed copy of one of the books of the bible.

Many people deride laws as man-made, restrictive, old-fashioned and out of touch. As you know from driving past any speed limit sign, we think that many laws exist in order to be circumvented without getting caught. In America, the Bill of Rights is loved not because it imposes restrictions, but because it preserves freedoms. Even though the first amendments are ten laws, we call them ten rights. That’s why they’re so attractive. They honor the independence that Americans have come to expect and enjoy.

The passing of laws in Congress remains contentious. Lawmakers stand their ground on proposals they find likable and on those they find intolerable. Many laws divide. How different is the world of sports, where, apart from the designated hitter, the rules are uniformly honored, respected, even loved.

So today, after hearing the Ten Commandments in the first reading, we should not be totally surprised to sing verses like these from Psalm 19, sentiments we rarely apply to political bills: “The law of the Lord is perfect... The precepts of the Lord are right.... They are worth more than gold, than the finest gold, sweeter than honey.” Many people feel that way about the rules of basketball and the Bill of Rights; all the more do we revere God’s law.

Each Lent the first readings at Sunday mass form a mini-series of episodes from salvation history. This year we began with Noah and the flood, and then heard about Abraham and Isaac. Today the story advances to the time of Moses. The overarching message of this mini-series of first readings is that God establishes covenants with us. In the Ten Commandments, God expects us to follow the law, and God will protect us as long as we do. The rules are not meant to be controversial or punitive. They help us build a society of mutual respect.

Everyone has rights. These should be respected. But for Christians, even when we are within the Bill of Rights, God’s law takes precedence. Sometimes claiming our rights makes us selfish, not charitable. This Lent, as we confess our sins, let us also examine both our rights and our responsibilities. The precepts of the Lord are right. They gladden the heart. Sometimes when we sacrifice our own rights, we gladden the hearts of others. Doing charity makes us happy, for it means we truly love what God commands.

Sunday, March 4, 2018