

## **“House Rules”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
March 3, 2024 - Third Sunday in Lent

[Exodus 20:1-17; John 2:13-22](#)

Please join me in prayer. “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen” (William Sloan Coffin).

House Rules: We all have them, whether stated or unstated, to give order to our lives and the spaces we live in, and these can be a blessing to us. Some of our rules, however, can limit our well-being and be as source of harm for ourselves and others.

In today’s lesson from Exodus, we read of how the Israelites received a set of house rules of the first kind that blesses. God gave to the people that were rescued from the house of slavery in Egypt a set of ten laws to help them to prosper in their new household, their tent-dwelling community, as they journeyed through the wilderness.

These ten rules came in two sets, the first dealing with people’s relationship with God and the second set addressing people’s relationships with one another, which Jesus, much later, summed up in his two rules: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. And he taught that in following these two rules in ways that are appropriate for each time and place people will find freedom for themselves and others.

Throughout his ministry he followed these highest laws in ways that brought people the blessings of healing, spiritual and physical, and he used his energies to disrupt life-limiting systems and structures that kept people from living out these greatest laws. Because of his commitment to living out the law of love for God and others and calling for others to do so as well, he actively disrupted parts of the religious systems around him that did not encourage people to flourish but that limited their lives, so while he was a faithful, observant Jew, he also railed against the religious leadership that added rule upon rule upon rule to the essential rules to love God and love neighbor.

In today's gospel lesson from John, from which we'll be reading over the next several weeks, taking a detour from our year-long journey through Mark's gospel, we read of Jesus challenging the religious system in the Temple in Jerusalem, the holiest place for Jewish people of his day as it was considered to be the house of God. He did so during the Passover celebration, when Jewish people would have been streaming into Jerusalem from near and far, by turning over the tables of those who were exchanging the foreign travelers' unholy Roman money, which would have been imprinted with the Emperor's likeness as well as words declaring him to be the divine son of God, with imageless money that could be used to buy animals to use in the holy temple for the religious rituals of sacrifice. Along with the money changers, Jesus drove out of the temple the animals and their sellers that he found there.

Why would Jesus disrupt these seemingly good services that were being provided for traveling worshippers? Perhaps the money-changers were extorting the travelers, as the other gospels suggest in their own interpretations of this event, or perhaps it was to preserve the sacred nature of the holy site, to keep it a place for worship and not a place to buy and sell stuff to get ready for worship. Whatever the reason, Jesus' disruptive act was interpreted in John and the other gospels as a sign of him acting in the tradition of the angry prophets of Israel's past, and they all include words from the prophets in their interpretations of Jesus temple-cleansing action. Today's reading from John includes Jesus alluding to words from the prophet Zechariah as he shouts, "Stop making my Father's house a marketplace!" In Zechariah 14:21, we read that "There shall no longer be traders in the house of the LORD of hosts on that day" when God comes to judge people and reign over them. It could be, from this context, that for John, Jesus is not just claiming the role of prophet, but as the divine Messiah or Christ who has come to establish the long-awaited just and holy realm of God on earth. In clearing the temple of money changers and animal-sellers, Jesus was not only taking the role of prophet but demonstrating that, through him, the Day of the Lord's reign was at hand.

By the time John's gospel was written, the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans, and its stones were heaped upon one another in ruins. The followers of Christ saw in themselves, however, a new temple, a new house of God that was raised up when Jesus himself was raised from the grave, as John's

gospel teaches that Jesus and his followers are united together as one. And Jesus, the holy prophet and reigning Messiah, seeks for this temple, the Church as the united, living body of Christ, to be the pure and holy house of God, in which is faithfully followed the house rules of loving God and loving neighbor.

In our own little wing of the house of God, here at the First Congregational Church in Stoneham, do we follow the life-giving house rules of love for God and others above all else? Or do we more faithfully follow any number of our life-limiting, petty rules about who we interact with and who we avoid, supporting some ministries while seeing others as being of lesser importance or of no value at all? Do we remember our mission, that, first of all, we come together to be a holy house of worship?

As this season of Lent continues, and we reflect upon what Christ would like to overturn and drive out each of our hearts and our ways of living together in this community of faith, let us all be open to receiving God's good, cleansing work in and among us, and let us rededicate our own temples of God's Holy Spirit, and the one we share, to the holy house rules of loving the Creator and all of God's beloved creatures. As we more faithfully live in love, may God and the whole world be blessed. Amen.