

Rules to Be Broken – Luke 13:10-17

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So, an update from Tuscaloosa: Jacob is fully engrossed in college life. He auditioned for the university orchestra and made it, as we all hoped he would. He's had his first classes, and all has gone well. He's applying for his first campus job to fill in some of his free time. And...he went to church with his suitemate last Sunday. I asked him how it was, and he said it was good but a little "too Baptist" for him, and he'd be trying another church this week.

You can take him out of the Presbyterian church, but you might not be able to take the Presbyterian out of him. We will see.

We grow up with a certain set of rules implanted in us—some of them firm and others not so firm. Some rules for living come from how it is that we were raised. Some of us adhere to them when we are adults, and others of us can't wait to cast them aside and live by our own rules. And then we live with the consequences, whether they are self-imposed or are imposed on us by others.

If we were raised that you go to church every Sunday, some preachers' kids keep on going with that. Others, though, want nothing more to do with church for a long while and are quick to break those rules.

Speaking of breaking the rules, every time we witness a judge in a court of law—or a jury for that matter—hand down a guilty verdict and then later accompany that verdict with a sentence for punishment, we are exposed to the interplay between judgment and mercy. Judges and juries are criticized one way or the other when the punishment is either viewed as too harsh or too lenient.

The story we just read illustrates wonderfully the tension between the law and the mercy that is or should be shown in light of the rules that are in place. And it is played out from the perspective of an advocate for each and Jesus himself, who teaches us how these two needed realities should co-exist.

Let's look a little more closely at the characters in the story and see if we can empathize with each.

First of all, there's the leader of the synagogue. It might be challenging to find empathy for him, both by habit and because of the way the story runs. But inviting a sympathetic reading of this character is crucial because what he offers is a clear and compelling reading of the law. He is, in other words, right: you are not supposed to do any work on the Sabbath according to religious law. He's a rule follower. And he protests to Jesus when Jesus breaks the rules in healing the sick woman.

Sabbath is a day for rest and renewal, and the rather negative view we take toward the various "restrictions" associated with the Sabbath would have been very foreign to the Israelites. Keep in mind that the law -- including laws about the Sabbath -- were given to the Israelites after their Exodus from Egypt. You remember Egypt -- where the Israelites were slaves and worked whenever their masters commanded them, likely never getting a day off. And so when they receive a command to rest -- to actually set aside one day of the week to rest their bodies and their livestock and retreat for a time of renewal and prayer -- trust me, they heard this only as good news.

We, too, would be better off taking Sabbath more seriously. We aren't slaves, certainly not in the way the Israelites were or some people still are, but certainly plenty of folks have to work long hours and sometimes more than one job to make ends meet. And many more of us have a harder and harder time disconnecting from work -- from emails or texts or the endless grind of a 24/7 world that never stops. Life, for people at all levels of the economic ladder, is both hectic and demanding. Might we also benefit from a proscribed time of rest?

Which is what the leader of the synagogue may be worried about. Once you start making exceptions for this reason or that, pretty soon no one is really keeping the Sabbath and it's lost its point altogether. And it's not just the Sabbath. The whole law is like that --

keep making exceptions and it's not really a law anymore; it's more like a suggestion, with little or no power to protect and preserve us.

Truth be told, we regularly agree with this leader. Perhaps not about the Sabbath, but most of us have laws that we think are particularly important and we get nervous if we see people not respecting them. Maybe it's little things like following the speed limit or waiting patiently in line. Or maybe it's a much larger issue, like traditional gender roles or human sexuality. Whatever it is, there are some laws we feel you should just keep. And if you don't, who knows what will unravel next?

And that's exactly what this well-intentioned, law-abiding leader of the synagogue may have believed. He didn't believe Jesus should be healing on the Sabbath. But his isn't the only perspective.

So now let's turn to the woman, she who has viewed the world from waist level for years, she who hasn't been able to look anyone in the eye for as long as she can remember due to her crippling illness. She is, I imagine, also a faithful, law-abiding member of this very synagogue. After all, she's right there that Sabbath day, in spite of her condition, worshiping with her community.

And who knows, maybe she also harbored concerns about keeping the Sabbath. Maybe she was downright conservative in her approach to the law more generally. Yet whatever principles or resolutions she may have entered the synagogue with, we have to imagine they all took a back seat to a sense of overwhelming relief and gratitude when Jesus approached and healed her, when he called her a daughter of Abraham and restored her to full health. What were those first breaths of air like, taken in by lungs no longer cramped from stooping over? And whose eyes did she first meet, as she stood up straight for the first time in anyone's memory.

Or maybe, more importantly, what happened to all those laws and rules and concerns and regulations? Did they fall away, as if they were of no importance? Maybe not. They were just suspended, perhaps temporarily forgotten, in those first few moments of sheer grace and gratitude.

Which is always the way it is with law. The law matters because it helps us order our lives and keep the peace. The law matters because it sets needed boundaries that create room in which we can flourish. The law matters because it encourages us -- sometimes even goads us -- to look beyond ourselves so that we might love and care for our neighbor.

But as important as law is -- and notice that Jesus doesn't set aside the law but rather offers a different interpretation of it -- it must always bow to mercy, to life, to freedom. Law helps us live our lives better, but grace creates life itself. Law helps order our world, but grace is what holds the world together. Law pushes us to care for each other, but grace restores us to each other when we've failed in the law.

Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God, and while the law helps us make sense of and get more out of life in the kingdom of the world, it must always bend to the grace that constitutes the abundant life Jesus proclaims. For above and beyond all the laws ever received or conceived, the absolute law is love: love God and love your neighbor. Or, perhaps, love God by loving your neighbor.

And so of course Jesus heals on the Sabbath. And of course the woman gives thanks. And of course the crowd rejoices. That's what always happens when grace invites us simultaneously to value the law and at times suspend it out of mercy, compassion, and love.

Think about those laws you would consider to be iron-clad. In the church, they aren't laws as much as they are traditions, right? We want to tightly hold on to our traditions because we feel they represent the right way to worship or to learn or to conduct the business of the church.

Yet, we must always remember that love for others can and should, at the right time, supersede our most stringent of traditions. When it involves showing the grace and mercy of God, the unwritten rules or regulations of our way of life should always take a backseat.

Grace is what Jesus offered the woman who wanted to follow the law but when offered the mercy of the Lord couldn't say no.

Some time back, there was a man who came into the church occasionally in need of some money to put gas in his car. He was a nice man, he asked politely, but he kept coming back. He held a job but often would be out of work. And so his expenses exceeded his income and he had problems keeping gas in his mid-90s Chevy.

Much of the time, I gave him a few bucks. But there were other times when either I didn't have money on me or I felt as though my mercy tank was low and I declined. On those occasions, I would try to uphold what I believe and what the culture believes is the law. And the law in this case is that after several acts of generosity, he should have had himself on his feet enough where he didn't need to ask me for assistance. "After initially helping him," I think, "he should be good to go."

And yet he returned more than once. And the question for me each time was whether I break the rules, whether I violate the law I seem to believe and that our culture seems to believe is in place.

All of us are faced with these decisions everyday—in our personal lives and professional lives.

I've heard it quoted that, "Justice is getting what we deserve. Mercy is not getting what we deserve. Grace is getting better than we deserve."

It seems that Jesus was good at the latter and that he calls us, when it's right, to break the rules.