

“Rule-breaker Jesus” GPPC 8-25-19
Psalm 71:1-6, Luke 13:10-17

Before we read the gospel lesson, I invite you to try something if you’re willing and able. I invite you to stand, if you’re able. If you cannot stand or you are unsteady on your feet, just stay seated. Now I invite you to bend forward and hold that position, while I read the gospel lesson aloud. Again, if you have problems standing or problems with your back, don’t do this. If you cannot stand, you can try it from your seat. Don’t hurt yourself. But if you can, bend forward and hold that position while I read. [I read the gospel lesson now.]

Okay. Go ahead and straighten up and take your seats, please. How did it feel to be stuck in that position? What did you notice about how your vision was affected by this posture? Can you imagine trying to walk around? Dress? Eat? Work? Take care of kids? How might it have an affect on your relationships with other people who were not stuck bent over? And how did it feel finally to be able to straighten out again?

Luke says Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the

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sabbath. A woman who had been stuck, bent over for eighteen years, showed up. And interestingly enough, she did *not* ask Jesus for help.

But Jesus saw her. Jesus truly *saw* her, called her over, and without asking a single question said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” He laid hands on her, and immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

What do we make of this? Well, first of all, we might notice the obvious; yet again Jesus healed somebody. If you read through the gospels, you’ll find literally dozens of times that Jesus healed people. Why? Because they were sick or hurt, of course! Why else? Because healing was important to Jesus, and healing is important to God.

Over the centuries we Christians, followers of Jesus, especially we Presbyterians, have believed that God wants people to be healed of whatever brokenness they’re suffering. So we’ve established hospitals and medical centers. We’ve sent medical missionaries to other countries and to needy rural and urban areas of our own country. We’ve worked not only to bring physical healing but emotional healing through mental health specialists and mental health clinics. In 1975, our congregation,

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along with several other Greensboro-area Presbyterian congregations, established the Presbyterian Counseling Center just down the street.

Presbyterians believe healing is a central part of our calling. So we're always looking for ways to expand healing for others. We're always asking how we can provide decent affordable medical care for everybody.

This woman who'd been afflicted, stuck for eighteen years, did not ask Jesus for help. Maybe she didn't even know he could help her. Or maybe she was afraid to ask. We don't know why she didn't ask. But Jesus took the initiative anyway. He called her over and healed her.

I wonder. Are there times in our lives when we don't know to ask for healing? Maybe we've gotten used to whatever we're suffering and we figure this is just how life is going to be. Or maybe we've asked for healing so many times and not gotten it. So we give up.

And maybe some people are afraid to ask for help. They are afraid they will be shamed or rejected or blamed. Or maybe they don't think they're worthy of being healed.

Because Jesus was God's love come to earth in human form, when he encountered brokenness, he did not ask if the person had caused the affliction or deserved the healing. No. Jesus simply healed, sometimes without even being asked.

But there was a leader of the synagogue there when Jesus healed the woman who had been stuck, bent over for eighteen years. As one scholar says, "The man, a 'leader of the synagogue'...was the person responsible for the building and the physical arrangements for the worship services..." (François Bovon, *Luke 2*, Hermeneia Series, 287.) This leader of the synagogue was upset with Jesus for curing on the sabbath instead of on another day. But notice what the leader did.

Luke says he kept complaining "to the crowd." He did not talk directly to Jesus with whom he was upset. No. He kept complaining to the crowd. Why? We don't know for sure. But maybe he was afraid to talk directly to Jesus. Or maybe he just found it easier to try to stir up the crowd rather than talk face to face with the person he was angry with. So the man missed the opportunity to deal directly with Jesus and with the claims of Jesus.

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And then there was his actual complaint. “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” So his concern was to keep the sabbath holy—no work, not even the work of healing someone.

But Jesus got the last word. It was a tough love word. “You hypocrites!” he yelled (just as we heard him yell last Sunday). Don’t you untie your ox on the sabbath and lead it to water? And ought this woman bound for eighteen long years, be set free from bondage on the sabbath day?”

You notice what Jesus did, right? There were rules about the sabbath—no work. But Jesus broke the rules.

When we were kids, about once a year our family watched the TV musical, “The Sound of Music.” Anybody seen it? The film was loosely based on the true life story of the Von Trapp Family Singers who were in Austria just prior to the beginning of World War II and who fled to Switzerland to escape the Nazis.

In one scene in the movie, the teenage daughter Liesl and her boy crush, Rolf, sing to each other “I am sixteen going on seventeen.”

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There's singing and dancing. And the song ends with their first kiss. It's sweet.

But near the end of the movie, the family is trying to sneak away from the Nazis who're trying to force the father to accept a commission in the German Navy. The family flees to the abbey. They are hiding there when Rolf (who has decided to become a Nazi youth) discovers them and prepares to tell the other searchers. But the father tries to talk Rolf out of it and to "come away" with the family into Switzerland. The father's speech is convincing. And he seems to have succeeded, until the father says, "You'll never be one of them." And with that Rolf yells, "Lieutenant, Lieutenant, They're here! Lieutenant, they're here!"

Every year I watched I wanted to grab Rolf and say, "You dummy! Wake up! Go with Liesl and the family!" But, oddly enough, Rolf never did. He never figured it out.

Then you may remember the Nazis tried to chase the family with their cars, but their cars wouldn't start. And off to the side, we see two nuns quietly speaking to the Mother Superior. "Reverend Mother, I have sinned," says one. "I too, Reverend Mother," says the other. And the

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Reverend Mother asks, “What is this sin, my children?” And with that the nuns hold out the engine wires and parts they have stolen from the Nazis’ cars.

But the nuns had not really sinned, had they? What they’d done was to apply the law of love to take precedence over a lesser law. They had seen real human need, and put response to it above the letter of the law.

And that is what Jesus did too. He knew the laws about the sabbath. But he broke those laws in order to fulfill the law of love, in order to grant healing.

And this is our opportunity as followers of Christ too. It can be complicated deciding which laws are temporarily set aside in order to fulfill the more important law of love. But the church continues to do it.

Many decades ago our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), changed its stance on the ordination of women. Yes, we knew about some of the passages in the Bible that talked about women being told to “be silent in church” and women not being allowed to teach men, that sort of stuff. But we balanced those rules against our knowledge of

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other passages in the Bible in which women clearly exercised full leadership in the church. So the law of love trumped those other passages.

Less than a decade ago, our denomination also changed its stance on the ordination of LGBTQ folks and changed its stance about same-sex marriage. Again, you could find a few passages in the Bible that had been used to deny ordination and same-sex marriage. But our new understanding of historical and biblical context, a better understanding of scientific data, and a number of other factors led the church to change. Our congregation, I believe, hosted the first same-sex wedding to be held in a sanctuary in our presbytery. We also supported one of our young gay members as she pursued and received ordination as a Minister of the Word and Sacrament. Beginning in September, our congregants will have a chance to continue to learn about this issue as a spiritual journey in a book study of *God and the Gay Christian*.

Consider your own life. Are there places in which you and I might let go of some rigidness in interpreting the law in order to embrace God's healing love? Is there something we are holding onto that is

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hurting us, keeping us tied in knots? And are there some areas in which you and I might be more gracious to others who are seeking healing and wholeness, but who are bound by rigid understandings of the Bible? Are there some issues our country is facing now in which this same principle might apply and bring healing and wholeness? Think about it and pray about it.

Luke says after the healing, Jesus' opponents were put to shame. But "the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing." The entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things he was doing, and we are invited to join them. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal