

Breaking the Rules  
Rev. Rebecca Jess  
August 25, 2019

I'm not sure when the last time was that you played a group game with children, but rules are a very important part of any game with kids. Even if you don't want to complicate things and try to build in as few rules as possible, kids will come up with more rules. They are ecstatic about sharing rules. When I work with kids during our Mission Possible Kids program, we start by playing some group games—mostly variations on tag. And when I ask who wants to remind the group of what the rules are, they all clamber to get raise their hands and wave them as close to me as possible. And if someone breaks a rule while we're playing a game, you'll hear about it. If there's one thing they love as much as rules it's fairness and justice. Rules can't be broken just so that someone can get to play a little longer, or so that one person is more likely to win—that would be an injustice felt so deeply that tears spring into eyes and voices get raised and every element of the injustice gets listed off in a stream of elevated intensity. Children have an acute awareness of rules and justice.

As adults, we have a slightly more nuanced understanding of rules and justice. The big difference is that we don't see rules as quite so black and white; we become aware of the grey areas as well. We know that rules, laws, commandments, are important, but we are also aware that they sometimes have to be broken. So when is it okay to break a rule, or a law, or a religious teaching? Or is it ever okay?

In our scripture from Luke today, we are introduced to a woman who has been bent over for 18 years. We're not sure what has caused her to be this way, whether from arthritis or chronic back strain, or psychological issues, or the result of trauma, but what we do know is that she has come to the synagogue to learn and to worship on the sabbath. We can imagine this woman showing up and no one thinking much of her. She'd been bent over, unable to stand straight for years. It's likely the others at the synagogue could hardly recall a time when she wasn't doubled over as she was. The woman had resigned herself to a life of looking down, or a little to either side, but never up. Never up to the warmth of the sun. Never up to gaze at the stars or the clouds. Never up to other's faces; to meet their eyes; to have her eyes held by theirs. Though she may have had a sense that some pitied her situation, she could never know from the looks on their faces—only from a sense of the positioning of their feet, which are far less expressive than a face.

So when Jesus took note of this woman, suddenly others did, too. And Jesus didn't wait to ask her about her background or story, or even ask her if she wanted to be healed. He simply said "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." He laid his hands on her and she stood tall and praised God. This seems like a quick and happy ending to the woman's trials for the past eighteen years. After all, wouldn't we have done the same if we had the opportunity? Wouldn't each of us, given a chance to help another in need with our own unique gifts, have done so, as well?

Not so for the leader of the synagogue. He interrupts what Jesus is doing to begin his own brief lesson for the people assembled there: "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day," he instructs. But why? Jesus just healed this woman who had only seen her own feet and the dirt on the feet of others for eighteen years. Shouldn't this leader be ecstatic? Shouldn't he be running into the streets and exclaiming the good news of God's Kingdom? Letting others know about the miracle that occurred *right in the synagogue he oversees*? Or, even more importantly, shouldn't he have gone right up to this woman and shared a pastoral moment of awe and wonder while looking at her, for the first time in years, directly in her eyes? Letting her know that this healing isn't a passing moment, but a joy-filled mystery that will act as the foundation for a totally different and spirit-led relationship with one another, with the community as a whole, with God, Godself? So then, why is he so indignant?

It's not that this religious leader is against the healing of another. Rather, he is against breaking the rules. And not just any rules, but one of the 10 Commandments. What this religious leader refers to in his reaction to Jesus' healing of the woman is the fourth commandment; the commandment that instructs the people of Israel to observe the sabbath day and keep it holy. We find this in Deuteronomy chapter five; Moses says, "Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God." For the leader of the synagogue, this woman has already been crippled by a spirit of infirmity, already been weighed down by some form of evil, for eighteen years. Why, then, did Jesus insist on breaking a commandment when he, and this woman, could have waited just one more day? One day after eighteen years? That's nothing! And then the woman would have been healed AND the law wouldn't have been broken.

It's easy for us today to look at this story and side immediately with Jesus; to say that the woman didn't deserve one more day of suffering, whether physical or mental; to say that rules can be bent and broken if it will end the strains of human suffering. But it's never quite that easy in real life.

In fact, what would that religious leader say to us today? It wasn't so long ago that Sundays in Canada were still a national day of sabbath; a day where shops had to close and shopping was prohibited and only essential services were available. Today, however, our Sundays are like another Saturday. Maybe you have the day off, maybe you don't. But either way, there are few who would scold you for working or shopping or playing or travelling on a Sunday. But the fact that we don't treat Sundays like it's the only day of rest anymore—the only time for sabbath—makes a different statement than the one Jesus is making. The sabbath is really only a small part of the story.

This woman has been suffering for years; bound to the shape of her body, unable to release herself from the physical and likely mental strain and spiritual weakness she endures daily. How often have we, like this woman, felt weighed down by spirits of darkness, of infirmity—spirits that don't just figuratively, but begin to literally weigh us down? Where lifting our limbs in the morning suddenly feels like a huge task? Where



lifting our heads to meet the inquiring or judging or pitying eyes of others becomes too much? Where we struggle to follow the, quote “rules,” of our time? Unwritten rules like the expectation that we should all always be seeking happiness at the cost of everything else? And seemingly religious rules like trying to stay in a marriage that just isn’t working? Stigmas around mental health where we hide the fact that we see a therapist? Following societal rules about when it is or isn’t okay to identify as gay, as trans, as bisexual? We hold ourselves and others up against these rules, these laws, these commandments. And they weigh on us. They burden us. They hold us down and keep us from living life as fully as we might like to—as fully as God would like us to live. Healing is required, but it is held back from us.

After the leader of the synagogue pointed out what he saw to be Jesus’ gross misconduct and blatant disregard for a commandment given by God, Jesus offers a new perspective and opportunity for healing. Jesus, when he heals this woman, tells her she is *set free* from her ailment. Where the synagogue leader jumps in to talk of when it is and isn’t appropriate to be *cured*, Jesus reveals deeper significance. This isn’t just about being healed or cured, it’s about being *set free*. It’s about liberation. “Hypocrites!” he calls out—because who among them don’t untie their animals on the sabbath to lead them to water? Who among them don’t release their animals from bondage to experience the satisfaction of a cool drink? So then why would we stand by and watch this woman suffer? Why witness the compression and isolation of her life when she could be free? Could be liberated from that which ails her physically, mentally, spiritually, and make her more able to praise God?

I wondered if there was significance in the fact that the woman had been afflicted for eighteen years. I discovered there is a Jewish method of assigning numbers to letters and the letters of *chai*, the Hebrew word meaning *life*, add up to 18. Jesus saw in this woman that there was still life. That there was a need for a spirit not of affliction, but of freedom. There is grace in freedom. There is life in freedom. There is Christ in freedom. What happens when our spirit is bottled up, bent over, tied tight? We become like the woman—unable to stand and praise. We become like the woman—binding ourselves and others to rules that enclose, isolate, burden, and restrict life. Rules can be good. Rules and laws and commandments; they are important. We cannot live without them. But there is also goodness in freedom, and grace in breaking some of those rules that lead to bondage and brokenness.

A story that another minister friend of mine once told me is about a man he met while serving a church in Quebec. The man came to the church one weekday and asked for help with something rather strange—burying a cat. You see, the man didn’t have much in his life—he was unemployed, had no family to speak of, lived on social assistance, barely kept up his home, and barely took care of his personal hygiene. He wasn’t the sort of person that most people wanted to be around or associate themselves with. But what the man did have in his life were cats. And one of them had died, and he wanted it to have a proper burial. So, my minister friend agreed to get a shovel and help him bury this cat. After helping him to do so, the man thanked him and said “I owe you one.” And my friend said, “Yes, you do. And to pay me back, I want you to come to church on

Sunday morning.” And the man did. He sat in the sanctuary and people greeted him and he shook some hands during the passing of the peace. And afterwards he said something to affect of “well thanks, pastor, I came today, so I guess we’re good,” and my friend said, “Oh, no. I helped you sneak into a park and dig a hole and bury your cat. You have to come to church more than just once.” And the man came again. And over time, the man kept coming. And his hygiene improved. And he found a suit jacket to start wearing to church. And he began a job search. And he looked up more because people looked up at him. And he felt included because people weren’t afraid to touch him—to shake his hand as they passed the peace. The rules outside of the church that dictated to people that they should stay away from this man, not touch him, not speak to him, kept this man bound to a life of shame, where the only contact he received were from his cats. But my friend’s church broke those rules. They saw life in that man and broke the barriers that kept him bound to an isolated, lonely existence. My friend says that wherever he is a minister he will always include the passing of the peace because touch, even just a handshake, is healing. It is including and unburdening and setting free.

Jesus not only announced that the woman was freed from her affliction, but he touched her, as well. And not only that, but he acknowledged her as a “daughter of Abraham”—in other words, a child of God, a member of the Jewish faith, worthy of touch and healing and love. Worthy of freedom from evil spirits. Worthy of breaking or bending the rules for.

The second half of the book of Isaiah is about hope. Our passage today from Isaiah emphasizes God’s protection of us: “Do not fear” it says, “for I am with you.” Where there had been judgement and pain and suffering of a people who had been exiled from their homes, God’s promise was one of hope. The suffering would not endure forever. Liberation from captors, from weakness of spirit and loss of faith would come for the children of Abraham, the children of God. Immanuel—God with us—would come and bring hope for a renewed creation.

Like the Israelites, we need to hear these words of God’s—a promise of renewed creation. We need to hear from Christ that that promise does not occur by following a strict set of unbreakable rules. Rather, the only rule we need to follow is Jesus himself. In doing this our eyes may be opened to new creation, to new life. Our bent over lives may be lifted and renewed. The suffering we feel bound to may be untied. And praise for God will be released from our lips as freedom and healing takes over.

Amen.