

Sermon for March 10, 2019

“Jesus Broke the Rules”

Matthew 15:10-20, Mark 2:23-28

Staunton Church of the Brethren

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How do you feel about rules? Some of us are possessed by them. Others of us like it more when they apply to others. Most of us are not total rule breakers. We won't have many friends and we will certainly have a lot of motor vehicle tickets. But when we do break the rules, we'd rather no one is watching.

The Jewish religion is based on a lot of rules; that's why the scribes and the Pharisees and the rabbis had to spend so much time studying the Torah, to learn the 613 commandments, let alone the thousands of laws in the Talmud, the guide to Jewish living collected over centuries. It may have started with Ten Commandments, but it exploded from there, and the average Jew was expected to maintain every last law. We would call that fundamentalist behavior, and the Pharisees were the enforcers. They could declare you unclean and force you to do certain ceremonial cleansing, or offer particular sacrifices in the temple. It was a big deal in Jesus' day, and fundamentalist behavior is still a big deal today. It's just that our fundamentals are not all the same.

We all have things: like the jogger going out at 5:30 a.m. on a dark, blustery, blizzardy morning is a fundamentalist about her exercise regime; the carpenter whose workshop looks like a display ad is a fundamentalist about the location of each and every one of his tools; the 6-year-old who makes his parents pick off every single one of those tiny dehydrated onion squares from his Happy Meal burger is a fundamentalist about his food; the office manager whose weekly staff meetings always take exactly the same form, no matter what crisis is surging through the office, or who insists that everything that takes place be "according to plan" or "according to Robert's Rules of Order" is a procedural fundamentalist; and the strict party-liners who would never consider voting for a candidate not run by their party are political

fundamentalists. By and large our fundamentals, our rules, are helpful. They keep us from acting out on our worst thoughts and emotions; and they keep us committed to something, which is good for us. But sometimes they don't make sense, or they are more destructive than we think, or they are just wrong.

“From healing on the Sabbath, to eating with unwashed hands and unclean people, to allowing his disciples to swipe food from another person's field, to declaring himself God, Jesus flouted rules, violated taboos, and promoted behavior nightmarishly wrong in the eyes of the establishment. Jesus would break the rules to bless you.” (Leonard Sweet) And in the eyes of leaders and much of society, that was just wrong. What do I keep saying – Jesus turned things upside down.

Leonard Sweet puts it in a nutshell for us. “Jesus didn't break rules just to be a rebel. Jesus had something even greater to show us and tell us every time he pushed the envelope. For example, Jesus revolutionized Sabbath keeping with three affirmations: Sabbath is made for humans, not humans for Sabbath. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath. And it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. “

“Jesus had an overriding, wild-card rule: break any of the rules of Sabbath sooner than do anything outright unkind or unloving or unsupportive of life. Always support life. To support death, not life, may be the ultimate sin against the Holy Spirit. He didn't so much reject the law as revise it the way God intended it whenever its interpretation by the institution did harm to people. What mattered to Jesus was not keeping the law but helping hurting people. Everything else was relative to that, including Jesus' freedom to break the law when it was breaking the backs and spirits of people.”

To play the game right, we need to play by the rules. But God doesn't play by the rules, at least not our rules. God sets the rules. Humans love rules. Hence Robert's Rules of Order runs the church. We are addicted to rules. But God is love and life, and God rules by who God is – Love and Life. Don't get me wrong, we need rules as a society, as individuals, to guide us and to manage our interactions. But God's rules mean more than helping us to get along and not hurt each other. And I don't know about you, but I believe that a lot of the laws in early

Hebrew days were local, that is to say, they were appropriate for the time and the culture, but quite frankly, we don't teach or practice them anymore. For instance, we don't bind leather pouches called tefillin to our foreheads and arms with sayings from the Torah in them; and we don't stone women suspected of adultery (just women); if the widow of your brother is childless, you are responsible to marry her and provide an heir; we are not to eat unclean animals, no rabbits or pigs, no lobsters, clams, oysters, no alligator meat, or chocolate covered ants; we are never to settle in the land of Egypt; and not to sell a field in the land of Israel in perpetuity; we are not to tattoo the body like idolaters; and there are 100 laws having to do with sacrifice; and we are not to destroy fruit trees in warfare.

So it's no wonder that Jesus and the Pharisees butted heads. Their role, according to their religion and their tradition, was to defend and uphold the laws, all of them; and Jesus, well Jesus came out of that tradition, and he was a Jew, but it became obvious to all who watched and listened that all those laws were not what was important. The laws meant to build a strong relationship with God, had instead become like a god themselves. Jesus' law, when asked by the lawyer, was to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, strength, and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself." Whatever else you did had to fit under that umbrella. Jesus was a fundamentalist too, but his fundamental was and is love.

It was love that urged Jesus to heal the man's withered hand on a Sabbath. It was love that kept Jesus from Satan's temptations in the wilderness. It was love that spurred Jesus to sweep the children up into his arms. It was love that drove Jesus to choose humiliation over political power. Douglas John Hall says that the law requires us to tolerate one another. But the law of Christ makes tolerance not enough. "It may be good enough, legally and politically, for the pluralistic society;" he says, "but it is not good enough for the one who did not say, 'Tolerate your neighbor,' but 'Love your neighbor.'" What a distinction. Just let that soak in for a moment. Jesus didn't say "tolerate your neighbor," but "love your neighbor," with the same love that you use for God.

And so we are all called to be love fundamentalists if we are to truly follow Jesus. Love is above all else. Rules will come and go according to our time in history and our culture, but

love is everlasting and is what really changes the world. Or as Leonard Sweet says it, "Today's churches need to cultivate Jesus' bad habit of breaking some traditions and rules and living in such a way that makes the heart sing and the mind dance."

This story comes from a Sunday school ministry in the part of New York City that has been rated the "most likely place to get killed." The pastor Bill Wilson himself has been stabbed twice, shot at, and a member of his team killed. But he stays there, and not without controversy, and ministers in Jesus' name to people the rest of the church has largely forgotten. The largest bus ministry in America is not in the suburbs, but in Hell's Kitchen.

He writes: One Puerto Rican lady, after getting saved in church, came to me with an urgent request. She didn't speak a word of English, so she told me through an interpreter, "I want to do something for God, please." "I don't know what you can do," I answered. "Please, let me do something," she said in Spanish. "Okay. I'll put you on a bus. Ride a different bus every week and just love the kids."

So every week she rode a different bus -- we have 50 of them -- and loved the children. She would find the worst-looking kid on the bus, put him on her lap and whisper over and over the only words she had learned in English: "I love you. Jesus loves you." After several months, she became attached to one little boy in particular. "I don't want to change buses anymore. I want to stay on this one bus," she said.

The boy didn't speak. He came to Sunday school every week with his sister and sat on the woman's lap, but he never made a sound. And each week she would tell him all the way to Sunday school and all the way home, "I love you and Jesus loves you." One day, to her amazement, the little boy turned around and stammered, "I-I love you, too." Then he put his arms around her and gave her a big hug.

That was 2:30 on a Saturday afternoon. At 6:30 that night, the boy was found dead in a garbage bag under a fire escape. His mother had beaten him to death and thrown his body in the trash.

"I love you and Jesus loves you." Those were some of the last words he heard in his short life -- from the lips of a Puerto Rican woman who could barely speak English."

Wilson asks, "Who among us is qualified to minister? Who among us even knows what to do? Not you; not me. But I ran to an altar once, and I got some fire and just went. So did this woman who couldn't speak English. And so can you. The days of religious rhetoric are over. People have to see the reality of the gospel. And we are the only Jesus they will see, folks.

You -- one person -- can make a difference. In Jesus' name, let yourself get close enough to people who hurt. Feel the pain. See the death. Feel the urgency. Then run to an altar and take your stand between the living and the dead."

I think Jesus is pleased with Bill's ministry and with this Puerto Rican woman's faith. Love is the answer we all need to hear, no matter what the rule makers say is appropriate. "Jesus loves you and I love you." Can you turn to your neighbors and say that, too?