

“Rules”**Luke 14:1-6**

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

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Fairlington Presbyterian Church

I’m going to share something with you that could get me in trouble. Maybe not big trouble since it happened 24 years ago, but some trouble nevertheless. (But it’s Lent, after all. A good time for confession.)

After seminary graduation but before ordination, I worked in a hospital in Hanover, New Hampshire as a chaplain. Because I was a seminary graduate, I was (ostensibly) equipped to offer pastoral care to patients and their families. But because I was not yet ordained, there were three things I could expressly not do: officiate at weddings, serve communion, or baptize someone. To do so would be in clear violation of the constitution of our denomination.¹ The Rules.

Now my specific assignment in the hospital was in the Intensive Care Nursery and Pediatric Oncology – two tough floors that they often gave the women chaplains, assuming we could relate better to mothers and children. But one weekend night, I was the only “on call” chaplain in the whole hospital, so whether your emergency involved a heart attack or injuries from a car accident, or . . . a sick baby, I was “it.”

And this was a teaching hospital in a university town, so almost all the patients were from some place else, far from their home pastor (if they had one) and far from family and friends.

It was in the wee hours of the night when I was paged to go to the Intensive Care Nursery – my usual stomping grounds – because a baby had just died. I found the mother and father holding their child in a room they’d been offered for privacy, and clearly they were shattered.

I knew this couple and their baby because I had prayed with the family on several occasions. None of his organs had ever functioned properly. We would sit by his Isolette for hours and pray that his kidneys would work, that his intestines would work.

His mother would have been absolutely giddy if only she could have changed his diaper one time. And I remember thinking that, if I was ever fortunate enough to have a healthy child, I would never ever complain about dirty diapers.

This is the child who had died. And as we sat and cried together, I asked the parents if there was anyone I could call for them. Was there anything I could do? And the mother, still holding her sweet baby said, “We were wondering . . . if you could baptize our son.”

¹ The Book of Order of the PCUSA.

Now, I was not yet ordained and so I could not legally baptize anybody in the eyes of the church. And, while I wasn't yet ordained, I had passed all my ordination exams and I knew that – theologically – there was no reason to baptize any person who had died. I also knew that the ordained chaplain in town – my supervisor – was away for the weekend.

But there were two heartbroken people before me who needed some semblance of hope, that God loved their son and that their son was a part of God's family. And so I took that child into my arms and – against all the rules – I baptized him in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. It seemed like the right thing to do.

Frankly, I was terrified that my supervisor would find out what I had done. But I also knew that God was aware of what I had done, and I believed that God would have mercy on me. It was an act of salvation for the parents – at least, that was my intention.

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So, there you have it. I broke some rules. Church rules.

Rules are important for keeping order, for keeping people safe. But some rules are more important than others.

I want you to think for a moment about someone you know who has left the church because of rules. Maybe human-made rules excluded them, when God's rules would have kept them close. Can you think of anyone who found themselves excluded from the community of God because of human rules?

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Jesus was an Orthodox Jew² and even to this day, Orthodox Jews are required to keep many, many rules – many of which cannot be found in scripture, but are a result of the writings of wise rabbis and their interpretation of scripture. For example, there are many rules about keeping the Sabbath – Shabbat in Hebrew. Specifically, there are 39 activities which Orthodox Jews must refrain from doing on the Sabbath³, which for a Jew, of course, runs from sundown on Friday night to sundown on Saturday night. And then there are additional activities which are prohibited on the Sabbath for Orthodox Jews, but they all derive from the list of 39.⁴

² Falk, Harvey. *Jesus the Pharisee: A New look at the Jewishness of Jesus*, NY, 1985, p.158

³ The 39 categories of activity prohibited on Shabbat can be divided into four groups. The first 11 categories are activities required to bake bread (תפך ארודים). The next 13 categories are activities required to make a garment (דגבד ארודים). The next 9 categories are activities required to make leather. The final 6 categories are activities required to build a house. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/39_categories_of_activity

⁴ See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shabbat#Prohibited_activities

For example, any activity which could lead to bread baking is prohibited. Also, there shall be no tying or untying of shoes. You cannot write more than two letters – and I don't mean one letter to your grandmother and that's it. I mean if you write the letter "A" then you cannot write the letter "B."

You cannot light a fire. You cannot carry something between a public and private domain. (For example, you cannot return a book from your house to the drop box at the Public Library.) Or in Jesus' day, you cannot return the fishing net or hammer you borrowed and return it to your neighbor.

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In Jesus' day, the Pharisees were a branch of Judaism which – to be fair – used rules to constantly remember their faith. They believed there was a written Torah – the first five books of the Hebrew scripture – and there was an oral Torah – laws orally passed down from Moses that we do not have in scripture. They spent a great deal of time interpreting all these laws.

And Jesus gave them fits because he often participated in activities that clearly violated these rules. In particular, Jesus seemed unconcerned with keeping Sabbath rules.

He let his disciples pluck grain to eat on the Sabbath⁵ which was clearly in violation of the this-could-lead-to-bread-baking prohibitions. And, according to Luke, Jesus healed at least five people on the Sabbath: a man possessed by a demon, a woman with a high fever, a man with a withered hand, a crippled woman, and the man in today's lesson.⁶

While healing on the Sabbath was not a specified prohibition included in the List of 39, it was considered "work" and in the written law of Moses – the Ten Commandments – work was clearly prohibited.⁷

But aside from this, the Pharisees had reached a point where they were obsessed with Sabbath-keeping to the point of expanding the rules to ridiculous ends:

- You could not look in a mirror, so that – in the event you might find a gray hair in your beard – you would be spared the temptation of plucking out the gray hair (which would violate prohibition #3 against "reaping").
- You could eat an egg on the Sabbath, but you'd have to kill the chicken for working.

⁵Luke 6:1

⁶ Luke 4:31, 38; 6:6; 13:10; 14:1

⁷ Exodus 20:10

- You could not plug a leaky wine cask on the Sabbath (that would involve “working”) but you could drink the whole cask by putting your mouth under the leak.⁸

It got to be ridiculous.

Jesus was not supposed to heal on the Sabbath because healing was considered work, and working on the Sabbath was not allowed. And even worse, sometimes the healing work of Jesus caused others to sin.

For example, when Jesus healed the lame man in The Gospel of John,⁹ we are told that the man stood up and carried his gurney home – which was in violation of Prohibition #39 – transporting an object from one place to another. The Pharisees jumped on that one.

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On the particular Sabbath day of our scripture lesson, it looks like one of the Pharisees had invited Jesus to his house for Sabbath dinner, much like we might invite someone over to eat after worship today. But this was no ordinary act of hospitality. The Pharisees were “watching Jesus closely” – probably trying to catch him in some new violation.

On their way to the Pharisee’s house, they saw a man with “dropsy” – today we would call it “edema” – a swelling of the arms or legs, maybe of the chest or abdomen. It could be caused by cancer or cirrhosis or heart problems. Maybe from pneumonia or an infection caused by a parasite.

We don’t know. But we can assume that it was fairly dramatic edema in that everyone could see that he was suffering with it.

Before Jesus approached the swollen man, he asked the Pharisees and their lawyer friends, “*Is it lawful to cure people on the Sabbath or not?*” And they didn’t say a word.

Jesus – ever gutsy – took the man aside and healed him and sent him on his way. And then Jesus said:

*If one of you has a child or an ox that has fallen into a well,
will you not immediately pull it out on a Sabbath day?*¹⁰

Clearly, it would be in violation of basic farming rules to use a well. But what if you are saving the life or your own child or your own ox?

⁸ See: <http://www.angelfire.com/nt/theology/jn05-01.html>

⁹ John 5:10

¹⁰ This story is part of a pair (the other is in Luke 13:1-16) which uses the example of watering ones donkey and ox. Some versions of the Luke 14:1-6 story use “donkey” instead of “child” or “son.”

Jesus was giving them a ridiculous scenario here. *Of course*, they would save their child or their ox. This was an extreme example he was giving.

But his point was: Sabbath is meant to free us not to imprison us. And what better time for freeing someone from his maladies than on the Sabbath? This is what worship is all about!

We have Ten Commandments from the tablets that Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai. And there are many other rules and laws that were set forth in the Hebrew scriptures.¹¹ But Jesus himself said that the greatest commandment of all is this one:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.

And the second greatest commandment is this one:

***You shall love your neighbor as yourself.
On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.***¹²

Jesus was not saying that rules are not important. He was saying that some rules are more important than others. These two commandments are more important than the others, more essential than the others.

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Our denomination is in the throes of figuring out which rules are more essential than others. When someone is ordained, we ask them if they will follow “the essential tenets” of our church. But we don’t spell out which tenets of faith are more essential than others.

Are rules about sexuality as important as rules about feeding the poor? This is the kind of thing we are debating.

When we weigh two seemingly opposing rules: having compassion versus upholding baptism prohibitions, for example – which side should weigh in more heavily?

God expects us to have respect for the rules, of course. But God also expects us to follow the example of Jesus – which doesn’t mean we throw the rules out the window. We simply watch how Jesus obeyed the Greatest Commandments and went from there.

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¹¹ Many of these rules and laws were given while the Israelites were traveling out of Egypt towards the Promised Land, and they make up The Holiness Code.

¹² Matthew 22:36-39

Today we celebrate the baptism of a child, and it's also the 4th Sunday in Lent. Frankly, in many churches you would not celebrate a baptism during the season of Lent because baptism is about new abundant life and Lent is about penitence and sober reflection, and it seems that these are mutually exclusive activities.

But if we believe that God is pleased when any of his children are included in his family, if we believe that God's will is for all God's children to make commitments to come closer to him, then I can't help but think that God is pleased for us to baptize a baby even during Lent.

The rule to include a child of God into the covenant seems to trump the rule to avoid such joyous events during this serious season.

Any time we are trying to discern God's will for us, anytime we are trying to figure out "What Would Jesus Do?" it helps if we ask ourselves questions like this:

Is God being honored in this act?

Is God being loved in our hearts, souls, and minds?

Is our neighbor being loved as we would love ourselves?

The answers to these questions generally offer some fairly clear guidance as we ponder day to day issues like:

Should I have a physical relationship with that person?

Should I cheat on my income taxes?

Should I stop and help that person by the side of the road on my way to work?

God's eternal purpose for us is to live abundantly because this is what brings God glory.

The sad part about obsessing with the rules – by living as if we have a cadre of lawyers judging our every move – is that we lose the joy of living. We miss the point of Jesus' message.

Again: have you ever known people who left the church because of human-made rules?

On a final note, as I was driving into the church parking lot today, I saw that a huge truck was parked in our lot which, of course, is against the rules. He didn't have church business here. He shouldn't have parked in our lot.

The last time a huge truck parked in our lot like that, his truck caused several hundreds of dollars worth of damage. We had a terrible time dealing with that company to be reimbursed for the damage.

And so, there I was in the parking lot – furious about this rule-breaking truck – and I could see that there was a large cab and then a place for the truck driver to sleep

behind the front of the cab. I considered banging on his truck door and waking him up, saying, “You can’t park in this lot! Don’t you realize it’s Sunday and you are taking valuable parking spaces!!”

But then, I remembered what this sermon was about, and I thought that it would be much more hospitable, more Christ-like to take a cup of coffee and a doughnut out to that guy and invite him into worship. It’s better to include him – even if he’s a rule breaker – than to exclude him. This is Jesus’ way.

Don’t get me wrong: rules are essential to keeping order. But God loves us so much that we need to remember to act in love ourselves. *That* message is what brings people into God’s family. *That* message provides abundant life.