

# Sermon: Pentecost 11

The Rev. Mike Wernick

August 25, 2019

Year C

Isaiah 58:9b-14

Psalm 103:1-8

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

Many of us have heard the saying that it's easier to ask for forgiveness... than to ask for permission... most often... it's when we want to break some kind of rule... a rule which we think doesn't serve us well... so we wonder how to get around it...

Although... a friend of mine recently got a cat... he likes cats a lot... he's moved in the last two years... and has been unable to have one... but he recently brought a cat home... to an apartment he's been renting... but now he has to move again... because his landlords don't allow cats... and he said... *it's an established rule... and they're not going to make an exception for me... which could then turn into having to make an exception for everyone... then there'd be no rule... they're close friends... and as landlords... I couldn't ask for better ones... and I can't take advantage of them...*

Joel and I bought a sign this summer for our teeny... tiny front yard... it's a sign that conveys what we believe are Gospel values... things like... *love is love... women's rights are human rights... injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere...* and a few weeks later... we got an email from the rental office reminding us that the Resident Guidebook requires that... *"no signs... advertisements... notices... or other lettering... be exhibited... inscribed... painted... or affixed by any resident... to any part of the outside of the building... garage... or from any window... there are no exceptions"...* and we had to remove it...

But surprisingly... the PRIDE flag we hung from our front porch railing for the entire month of June elicited no such response... apparently... what's considered a symbol...

whose meaning is open to interpretation... is OK... but when you state clearly what you believe... that's not allowed... maybe because it helps neighbors get along better...

But landlords who enforce rules... have a right to do so... we enter a contract with them... they provide ABC... we commit to XYZ... and it's not just about the rent... there is some mutual accountability... there is some reasonable expectation... rules provide some stability... reliability... but sometimes... rules do need to be challenged... and changed...

In the movie... On the Basis of Sex... young lawyer Ruth Bader Ginsberg... confronts discrimination against all women... by confronting discrimination against one man... this was a time when... for example... a woman could not apply for her own credit card... it had to be in her husband's name... and the case she took on was for Charles Moritz... who had to hire a nurse... to help him care for his aging mother so he could continue to work... but he was denied the legal tax deduction for that cost... because at that time... Section 214 of the IRS Code specifically limited the deduction to "a woman... a widower... or divorcee... or a husband whose wife was incapacitated or institutionalized... and the court denied the deduction... since Moritz was a single man who never married...

Ginsberg's rationale in doing this... was that over time...cultures simply change and evolve... sometimes finding that things which were once inconceivable... like same-gender marriage... are now permissible... and... perhaps more importantly... things that were once permissible... like slavery... and segregation... must no longer be so...

Her goal in this case... was to show that laws which discriminate on the basis of gender... whether they have to do with taxes... equal pay... overtime... or any other issues... harm everyone... and not just women...

The law has always been one of those systems under which we live... but which we sometimes do not see... and which we defend... either implicitly... by not questioning specific laws... or explicitly... by advocating for them... often motivated by what we'll gain or lose... personally... but those in positions of authority don't want people to get around rules... they need people to follow the rules... unless they think there's a darn good reason to make an exception...

On July 22, 2007... there was an article in the New York Times Magazine written by Noah Feldman... Noah wrote about his experience of having been educated in a Jewish school... run by a group called Modern Orthodox... he reported on a school assembly... in which a local physician... a member of the Modern Orthodox movement... argued that the Torah teaches that one might break the Sabbath to save the life of a Jew... but not a Gentile... except under certain extenuating circumstances... however outrageous this may sound to us... this interpretation of the Law highlights how seriously... people can take... or have taken... the Sabbath...

This story helps us understand today's Gospel... and some of why what Jesus did in the Gospel was so at odds with the synagogue's theology about the Sabbath... and it asks whether that theology was to honor the cycle of creation as outlined in Exodus 20: 8-11... or to honor liberation from work as described in Deuteronomy 5:12-15... it also touches on the synagogue's theology about women... and illness... and lifts up the core value of Jesus' ministry... which was and remains... the restoration of wholeness...

The woman who was bent over... was probably a regular at the synagogue... but she had never been cured there... and was not likely to be... yet in spite of this miraculous healing... the leader's complaint focuses not on what Jesus did... but on when he did it... and we can see the glaring hypocrisy exposed by Jesus' question... *so why exactly is it OK to untie your animal on the Sabbath... and lead it to water... when that's work... but not remove what has been oppressing this woman for eighteen years...*

And the pious leader of the synagogue is like... *I'm all for healing people... healing's GREAT... just not on the Sabbath...* but there's something egregious in this story... this woman... a daughter of Abraham... is being treated worse than an animal...

You see... if Jesus cures on one of the other six days... the God who guards the Sabbath is not challenged... but by curing on the Sabbath... he forces a question about the nature and intention of God... is God really all that concerned with restricting the activity of people... even healing activity... on the Sabbath... or is God most concerned with freeing people from being bent over in any way... either literally or figuratively... and bringing them to full stature...

And Bp. Satterlee asks... but isn't that what we say to people who have been bent over by all sorts of oppression... wait just a little bit longer... until we can figure it out... until everyone is ready... until it all feels more acceptable to us... just bear quietly... whatever's causing you to be bent over...

The ELCA just celebrated the fiftieth year of ordaining women... but some people still want to wait... and the Gospel text drives home the point... this woman isn't the one who can't wait... she's abiding by the rules... it's Jesus who can't wait... not one more day... not until it's all figured out... not until everyone's ready... not until everyone's comfortable and in agreement... before freeing this woman from whatever it is that's keeping her bent over...

People are usually all about the rules... as long as the rules vex those OTHER people... but when the rules become personal... when the rules touch someone they love... then suddenly... they become more willing to bend them...

Let's remember... all religions hold on to certain rules... because it helps them hold on to authority... one of the priests at this week's lectionary group... lamented... that the church must heal the beam in it's own eye... before it can criticize the splinter in

society's eye... how... he asked... can we heal the social divisions we face... when we haven't healed the theological divisions we face... like who may receive communion... and who may be ordained... and about which we argue... and so we must ask... what are the injustices of our own piety... that we don't want to acknowledge... or can't see... what sort of institutional systems do we uphold... that end up preventing acts of justice... kindness... healing... and wholeness... it's interesting... Jesus didn't wait until everyone was ready...

Mike+