

August 25, 2019
Rev. Jane Florence
Title: "Misbehaving in Church"
Text: Luke 13:10-17



Six times in Luke's gospel, we are told that Jesus went to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus is a faithful Jewish man who upheld the traditional religious practices by participating in the faith community as prescribed, or "as was his custom" on the Sabbath. Jesus behaves according to Jewish tradition by going to the synagogue each Sabbath. However, this week something happens which calls Jesus out of traditional Jewish custom. A woman enters the scene. A woman was bent over for a long, long time. We are told that when Jesus saw her, he called her over. Here's the first bit of acting out behavior we see. Jesus has already broken a rule. Jewish men are not permitted to speak in public to a woman, and women were to keep their distance from men in public especially in the synagogue.

Jesus pays no heed to protocol; he calls her over. Then he says, "woman, you are set free from your ailment." Then he laid his hands on her. Jesus has done several rule-breaking behaviors by now. Not only did he speak to a woman in public no less; not only did he call her over to his presence; he also laid hands on her offering healing and a way of offering a blessing. To top it off, he did all this in the synagogue on a holy day, the Sabbath.

Have you ever been in a fixed position for a long time? A long drive in a cramped car? Sitting behind your desk in a tense day of trying to get it done by deadline? Bent over pulling weeds in your garden all day? If you have, then you know what's it like to have your muscles and joints freeze up. If you've ridden in that car, same position for hours and hours, you know how hard and how good it feels to get out and stretch stiff muscles. Imagine being in the same position not for hours, but for 18 years.

Her world view centered on the ground. She could recognize people – not from their faces – but by their feet. She knows your crooked middle toe, that funky fungus on the little toenail. She sees the purplish stain near your ankle, or that scar across the top of your foot. That is how she knows you. She has every piece of ground in the village memorized- one dirt path winding slightly to the right, the next dirt path with the tiny stones, some with more sandy grains. She hasn't really seen the sky in years, but the intensity of the glare off the stones reflects sunlight or haze. Bless the little children; their faces she could see before they grow higher than her curve.

Many ignored her, pushed past her in the streets without a word and took their places of importance in the synagogue. Few bothered to lean over themselves to make eye contact. There is a man's voice calling out. She sees the feet around her turn about pointing towards her. She hears someone whisper, "He's talking to you!" The feet around her part. She shuffles closer crossing over lines of social taboos.

"Woman, you are set free" she hears his voice again. Then his hands gently lie on her back. The warmth of his hands spreads; healing energy moves up through her spine. Every vertebra slides into place; she rises up like the phoenix from a fire. She arches her back for the first time in 18 years. She lifts her face to the heavens for the first time in nearly two decades. Praise to God pours forth spontaneously and pours out into the room. It spreads to all like a wave of glorious praise lifting all on the tide of awe.

The religious leader of the synagogue did not join in the praise chorus. The leader of the synagogue was “indignant.” Jesus broke God’s laws; the Sabbath was sacred and rules regarding women were solid. Jesus’ offense was serious. Because Jesus broke the rules, now, there’s a woman standing up in the synagogue, speaking out and praising God. How dare he! How dare he! The audacity of Jesus brings anger, outrage to the leader of the religious community.

The NRSV text reads, the leader, “ **kept saying to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done, come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath’**”. Notice, the leader ‘kept saying to the crowd.’ He didn’t say it once or twice, but he kept saying to the crowd. Picture that. The woman starts praising God and others join in, and maybe pretty soon everyone was praising God. Maybe all their praising God was so loud the leader had to keep saying it over and over- trying to be heard over their thanksgivings, their songs, their cheers of hallelujah! Jesus has stirred up quite a commotion. The woman has been healed and her enthusiasm and gratitude is so contagious that the whole room erupts into shouts of joy. There’s the official religious leader, trying to yell above all their praising, trying to get them to settled down from all their hallelujah’s and remember the rules. This scene is almost comical if you think about it. Worship leaders working so hard to get people to praise God, and here’s one trying to get them to hush up.

It’s tempting to poke fun at this poor guy. I wonder how we would fare given the same situation. What would we do? What would ushers do? What would you do? If something like that happened here on Sunday morning. If someone were so moved by gratitude, by healing, by an experience of God’s presence in their lives, if they just started praising God- out loud- right here in church- not in keeping with the order of worship – or the plans for the morning. What would we do if one of you, suddenly broke our religious taboos – broke our routine for Sabbath- broke our understanding of God’s laws? Would we go with the moving of their spirit and toss out our order of worship and join the celebration? Or would some of us, particularly the religious leaders, try to regain control of our orderly worship and get us out as scheduled?

Jesus speaks to the leader trying to regain propriety in their service. Jesus begins with pretty harsh words, “You hypocrites!” Then he points out that the religious leaders would treat their animals better than they want this woman treated. They would care for their ox and their donkey – even on the Sabbath- but they protest when Jesus cares for this woman bent over. Jesus makes it clear that religious leaders more concerned with ceremony than compassion will be put to shame.

In the middle of all that shaming of the religious leader, Jesus refers to the woman as a ‘daughter of Abraham.’ Jesus’ words declare new status for women. No longer are we legitimate only because of a spouse or father or other male relationship. Now she is of her own right a daughter of the covenant between God and Abraham’s descendants. God’s people are sons AND daughters; children of God together.

When Jesus finishes, the religious leaders were ‘put to shame’ and the entire crowd erupted once more rejoicing at all the ‘wonderful things he was doing.” Notice just what ‘wonderful things [Jesus] was doing’

- 1.He **saw** a woman on the periphery that others ignored.
- 2.He **called** to her, to welcome her. He called out to include this woman from the margins and bring her into the center.
- 3.He **claimed** her value as a child of God.
- 4.He **offered** her liberation from her bondage giving her blessings of God.

5. He **challenged** the unjust ritual of the church.

6. He showed that compassion for people superseded rules for religion

The leader of the synagogue thought Jesus had misbehaved by breaking religious rules and cultural norms. The leaders want the issue to be about maintaining religious order- religious practice. But instead, Jesus maintains that it was the religious leader who misbehaved by wanting to uphold a rule instead of compassion. Jesus was willing to challenge and to change the rules of his day when compassion for God's people was in jeopardy.

Social norms and church 'rules' have continued to change over the years. They've changed much in our lifetimes. It was not all that many years ago when an eyebrow was raised and comment made the first time I wore pants to church. As a child, I always wore a Sunday dress to church. I know my grandmother wouldn't have gone to church without her Sunday hat and gloves. I never saw my grandfather in anything but his overalls except for Sunday mornings, of course. Before that, I've read of a time, when the Methodist church was white-only. People of color were dragged out of church by the ushers when they dared to kneel in prayer in a white church. We've changed much, in some respects in our 2,000 years. Praise God.

Perhaps, God is not through with us yet. Perhaps we still have a ways to go in our transformation. Yes, transformation into gracious people of God means change. Sometimes it means change in what we do, how we do, and where we are comfortable. Perhaps God isn't through with us yet. Who else? How else? Can we do wonderful things like Jesus?

1. Who else can we SEE on the periphery?
2. Who/how else can we CALL IN people from the margins to stand in honor in the center?
3. What can we do to RECOGNIZE their value as heirs of God's love?
4. In what ways can we offer them liberation and share the blessings of God's kingdom?
5. What of our own rules or rituals might we change to be more fully welcoming to all?

How do we answer these questions? Perhaps by asking ourselves more questions: Which of our own practices would we be most offended if they were broken or challenged as Jesus broke and challenged the Pharisaic keeping of Sabbath? What do we do as ritual here which may be seen as a barrier to others? Jesus teaches us in this passage that religious institutions exist, not to be served, and not to be preserved at all cost the way they've always been. We exist only for the purpose of honoring God by welcoming and serving all of God's people.

May we continue to do so, and may we find more and new ways to do so. With God's Spirit guiding us, may we be astounded by the wonderful things God is doing through us.

In the blessing of God's love. Amen.