

Sermon-8/22/10 Newport Pres. Church
"The Balancing Act"
Luke 13:10-17

Perhaps some of you saw the PGA championship golf tournament last Sunday. It all came down to three golfers who tied for the lead after 72 holes. But, just before they could begin the extra holes to determine the winner, the rules committee disqualified one of the golfers for a minor infraction of the rules on the last hole.

If you don't know golf, it is a bit hard to explain. It all came down to his grounding, or touching his golf club, behind the ball he was going to hit. That is something that is not allowed when one is in a sand trap. His ball was sitting in a sandy patch that hardly looked like a trap. It had been trampled by the crowds. The golfer had no idea it was a sand trap. But he did touch his club to the ground before striking the ball and it ended up being a two stroke penalty eliminating him from the playoff holes and costing him several hundred thousand dollars in prize money.

The rule itself is obscure to most of us. The penalty seems completely out of proportion to the deed. It felt like the golf officials were being incredibly Pharisaical. They got booed by the crowd. His grounding the club did not give him an advantage or change anything. How fair was that to enforce it at that critical juncture?

I thought about that situation on Monday morning when I started working on our text for today. It, too, is about rules, religious rules, in this case, that on the surface seem incredibly unfair and ridiculous. In our passage the leader of the synagogue is upset that Jesus heals a woman plagued by a physical condition. It became an issue because Jesus did it on the Sabbath. This is one of three stories in Luke about healing on the Sabbath. Apparently this was a huge issue for Luke's church. As we shall see it has some relevance for modern churches as well.

In order for us to let this scripture be useful for us, we must not write off the leader of the synagogue too quickly. He has been given a bum rap down through the years. At first glance he just seems like such an insensitive jerk. We may still end up with that evaluation of him, but before we do, let's take a deeper look at the issue Luke is presenting to us.

Sabbath law is a complicated subject. As we know it originated in the Ten Commandments where we are ordered to "Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you." (Dt. 5:12) Remember the Jews considered the Torah, that part of the Bible where the Ten Commandments are located, to be especially holy. The Torah was the very heart of God's word. This was serious business.

And, I might add, observing the Sabbath is actually a good thing. The command to rest on the Sabbath is one of God's gifts to humanity. It is a way to begin to deal with the relentless grind of the week. We can just shut things down, take it easy, and remember what is truly important in life. We can spend time with family or just taking a nap.

It used to be stores were closed on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath. There were even blue laws that prevented some things, like meat or alcohol, to be sold. My parents would not let us kids go

to the movies or the bowling alley on Sundays. My dad did not want to support businesses that made their employees work on that day.

Now, of course, that is all out the window. Schools hold sporting events on Sunday. No day is sacred. Busy parents use Sunday to work on chores that have been put off the rest of the week when work and parenting responsibilities overwhelmed the day. Observing the Sabbath is something few even give a second thought to. It has eroded little by little and now it feels like a meaningless commandment, or one that is ignored without guilt.

The issue is, once you start compromising on a rule, like Sabbath observance, where do you stop? If you say it is ok to do some critical activity, even if it is for good reasons, where do you then draw the line? This is a more complicated issue than it would seem on the surface.

It is the leader's job to enforce the rules. If the leaders get sloppy with enforcement, then rules become meaningless. The leader in the synagogue made a defensible point. There are six days in the week when healing can take place. Why make a point to do it on the Sabbath, breaking a commandment as it was interpreted by the religious authorities of that day? We may think they drew the line too strictly when they set their Sabbath laws, but lines need to be drawn somewhere and then enforced, or you might as well not have a rule at all. Some have even said the Ten Commandments ought to be renamed the Ten Suggestions!

But, let's look even deeper. Jesus was pointing to Deuteronomy's version of the Ten Commandments. Deuteronomy's explanation of why the Sabbath is holy differs slightly from Exodus' version of that commandment (Ex. 20). In Dt. 5 we read that the reason we have the Sabbath is to protect us from being oppressed by our bosses or our work. Deuteronomy says that we are to remember how God saved the Jews from slavery in Egypt, freed them from forced labor under Pharaoh. Therefore we are not to ever let anyone oppress us again. We deserve a break at least once a week.

As one commentator points out, Jesus says this bent over woman was oppressed by Satan for 18 years. To free her from that bondage to her illness was to affirm the heart of the Sabbath laws. He points out this oppression went on for 932 Sabbaths, or 18 years, and now she can fully experience the Sabbath as a free woman.

We need to remember this bent over woman represents so many women down through the years that have been oppressed. One scholar gives some incredibly sad statistics about women today. She writes that there are 60 to 100 million fewer girls than boys in the world "due to selective abortions, selective infanticide or neglect, and the uneven allocation of basic resources such as food, health care and education to girls. The battering of women results in more injuries requiring medical attention than auto accidents, muggings and rapes combined."

We need to see Jesus' actions in light of how women were treated in his day. We are told that the Pharisees at that time twisted Sabbath rules to use them as a means of social control and oppression. Jesus' actions were done in light of that fact as well.

The older I get, the more religious rules and some arbitrary theological tenets are harder and harder for me to defend. They just don't stir my passion like they did when I was younger. Sometimes it just feels like a control issue, or a way to exclude others. At other times, it just feels petty to push rules over people.

Obviously I am not promoting an anything goes sloppiness. That does not serve anyone very well. Sloppiness can cause as much injustice as uptight rule enforcement. Certainly poor theology needs to be guarded against. I don't think it is helpful to believe anything one wants. Some beliefs lead to very bad behavior. But a slavish defense of religious rules and wooden, literalistic interpretations of some Biblical passages at the expense of compassion and justice is even more troubling. It is a balancing act to walk between two extremes. There are no hard and fast guidelines as to how one does that. We need each other to walk that delicate line with integrity.

We also have Jesus as a role model. He breaks rules given by God for a higher good. Look at how he breaks the Sabbath rule against healing in this passage. It is a matter of total grace. The woman never asks to be healed. She makes no profession of faith. Jesus takes the initiative. The religious leader, sadly, could not see God's hand in Jesus' action.

See how Jesus gives this woman her dignity back. He calls her a daughter of Abraham. That is the only time in all the gospels we see that phrase. Herb O'Driscoll says we are seeing more than a curing going on here. He says we are seeing a healing. She is given her dignity back. She is restored to her community. Her bent body was cured, but the healing she experienced was even more significant.

Another commentator said Jesus was making a point to broaden what we see as sacred or holy. The Sabbath is sacred. The Ten Commandments make that clear. But, so, too, is human life. And when it comes to deciding between honoring one sacred thing over another, Jesus makes that clear as well. Compassion trumps even sacred religious rules.

We can only feel the power of this story if we take observing the Sabbath to be an important thing to remember. If we never have a Sabbath we observe, no matter what day we call Sabbath, then Jesus' actions here seem obvious and the leader of the synagogue is just an uptight idiot. If we take the Sabbath seriously we may we hear what the Spirit is trying to teach us in this scripture this day. Amen