

He's Breaking All the Rules

Luke 5:17-26

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Ever since I was a kid in Sunday School, I have liked this story. My teacher had one of those big Sunday School pictures of this scene—the men looking down through the hole in the roof and the paralyzed man lying on the mat in front of Jesus. This is the kind of story that appealed to a Primary Department boy like me who—at least according to my mother—was always tearing up stuff.

It was always funny to me to imagine those stuffy scribes and other religious leaders who were sitting there listening to Jesus that day. When all of a sudden, they heard this racket overhead, and then bits of dust and dirt and plaster started falling down on them. They looked up just as a big chunk of the ceiling fell down. Now everybody in the house was looking up just as one of the guys up on the roof stuck his head down through the hole they had made. He didn't say anything; just kept making the hole bigger and bigger. After awhile, the hole was pretty big, and then to everyone's amazement, the guys on the roof started lowering down through the hole their friend who was paralyzed. He was lying on a mat to which they had tied ropes at the four corners. Down he came until he was lying there at the feet of Jesus.

By the time the story ends, the once-paralyzed man is now walking on his own two feet. Something makes me think it was more like jumping, hopping, skipping, running on his own two feet—dancing his way home, with every step giving glory to God.

It is a wonderful story of the healing power of Jesus. But as wonderful as it is just standing on its own, if we take this story out of its larger context and focus just on the story itself, we miss some of the other issues going on here. So we need to go back a few verses.

Chapter 5 of Luke begins when Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James and John to join him. He tells these fishermen that they will soon be fishing for people. Something makes me think that when these four fishermen left their nets and followed Jesus, they had in their minds a picture of the kinds of people they would be fishing for.

So I think they were probably a little surprised when the first “fish” they caught was a man with leprosy. That's the scripture passage we looked at last week. A leper was as close to a nobody as you could think of...and besides that, the Jewish law said that a leper was “unclean” and couldn't have any contact with other people. A leper couldn't go to the synagogue or Temple for worship; a leper couldn't live among non-lepers. This guy was a nobody, not what you might think of as a prize catch.

The story that follows the passage we read for today tells about when Jesus called another person to follow him—this time it was a tax collector. If a leper was a nobody, a tax collector was despised and hated. Tax collectors were cheats and thieves, and they were working for the enemy, the hated Romans. Tax collector was synonymous with sinner.

And tucked between these two stories is the one we read about this paralyzed man who was lowered through the hole in the roof.

Now there's something you need to know about the way people thought back then (and honestly the way some people still think today). They believed that there was a straight line connection between illness and sin. They believed that if someone was sick, it must be because that person was a sinner...and the sicker you were the bigger sinner you were.

You remember the Old Testament story of Job and all the calamities and terrible things that happened to him: death of loved ones, terrible sickness, loss of property and wealth. So when Job's friends came to comfort him, they were convinced that Job had done something sinful that made God angry and for which God was punishing Job. They believed that sickness was God's punishment for sin. And so one way you could be sure someone was a sinner was if that person had some sort of malady or illness—like paralysis.

Well, that was the commonly accepted idea in Jesus' time: sickness = sinfulness. So when word started spreading around that Jesus was healing people—like the man with leprosy—the religious authorities got a little suspicious. After all, that was their area—dealing with sins and all.

Today's scripture reading says that Pharisees and teachers of the law had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem to hear Jesus. We'd like to think that they came because they genuinely wanted to hear what Jesus had to say. But I'm afraid their motives weren't that pure. They were there as the "Rules Police" to make sure that Jesus wasn't doing something that was against their rules. Pharisees and teachers of the law saw themselves as protectors of the religious law, and they weren't going to tolerate someone who was breaking those rules. That's why they were sitting there that day when the dust and plaster from the roof came falling down on their heads.

I imagine that it would have been pretty hard to ignore someone who is being lowered down from the roof. So when this paralyzed man was finally there before Jesus, Jesus turned his full attention to the man. I picture it with Jesus on one side, the paralyzed man in the middle and the Pharisees and teachers of the law on the other side. For the Pharisees and teachers of the law, they knew everything they needed to know about this man who was stretched out on that mat: he was a sinner. And he must have been a pretty bad sinner to be afflicted with paralysis as he was. And there were rules that dictated how to deal with people like this sinner. Primarily, the rule was to have nothing to do with people like that.

But Jesus, kneeling on the other side of this man, saw him differently. When Jesus looked at this paralyzed man, he saw a child of God. Rather than putting him in a box labeled "sinner" and then pushing that box away, Jesus saw a child of God in need of God's grace and forgiveness. Whereas most of the religious leaders didn't want to have anything to do with people they had labeled as sinners, Jesus seems to be going out of his way to reach out to them—a leper, a tax collector, a paralyzed man. Jesus embraces them all.

So to this paralyzed man lying on the floor in front of him Jesus says, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

Well, when Jesus said that, the Rules Police on the other side of the paralyzed man just about had a seizure: "He can't say that. That's blasphemy. He's breaking all our rules."

Jesus must have known what they were thinking, because he said to the Pharisees, "Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say 'Stand up and walk'?" Without waiting for them to answer, Jesus said to the paralyzed man, "Stand up, take your bed and go home." And with that, the now no longer paralyzed man got up and walked home.

So that's the story, and if you think about it, there's a lot of tearing up going on in this story. It begins with the friends tearing a hole in the roof so that their paralyzed friend could be brought to Jesus, and it ends with Jesus tearing up the old Jewish legalism that put people into boxes and prescribed how you were supposed to relate to them.

Whenever I read a Bible passage like this, one of the questions I ask is "Where am I in this story? Which character or characters in the story do I identify with?" In this particular

story, I quickly rule out identifying with Jesus. I know that people often like to ask What Would Jesus Do?—WWJD? But frankly I don't find that especially helpful because I cannot do what Jesus did. I cannot perform miraculous healings like Jesus did. I cannot forgive sins like Jesus did. I cannot die for the salvation of the world like Jesus did. As much as I may want to identify with Jesus, I cannot.

So who do we identify with in this story? Unfortunately I have to admit that I see something of myself in those Pharisees and keepers of the law. We Presbyterians are good at coming up with rules to cover this situation and that situation. And any time a new situation comes up, we form a committee and come up with a new rule to cover that new situation.

When I first entered the ministry almost 40 years ago, the *Book of Order* was less than 100 pages long. Now it looks like this—over 400 pages. We've gotten so obsessed with coming up with rules that the book keeps getting fatter and fatter. It's like we don't really trust each other any more, so we keep making up more and more rules to prescribe how we are to do things.

Now I don't want to suggest that we can just throw out all the rules. Rules have a purpose; they are made to be a guide for how to live together in community. But sometimes the rules become so restrictive that they keep us from seeing the bigger, more important thing, God's thing, God's grace.

I think I've told you before about the time at our little church in Hernando, Mississippi, when we were having a Maundy Thursday communion service. We wanted the service to be unique and special, so we set up a table and chairs at the front of the sanctuary, and groups of eight to ten people would come forward, sit down at the table, and be served the bread and wine. One elder and I stood at the table and served the people when they took their places there. When the last group came forward, there were only four people, so the elder and I sat down at the table with them. Now no one was left standing to serve us. I had thought that I would just take the plate and the cup and pass it around table. But an 18-year-old girl, who was sitting in the congregation, without being prompted in any way, got up from her pew and came forward and served us. What I saw that night was someone who was so attuned to what it means not to be served but to serve that when she saw an opportunity to serve, she did it. And I was deeply moved by what she did. It was a wonderful experience of grace for me.

I was so moved by the experience that a couple of days later I was telling a friend about it, and he said, "She shouldn't have done that; she's not an ordained elder. She can't serve communion; that's against the *Book of Order*." And I remember thinking: Yes, as far as the rules go, he's exactly right: that is what the rules say. But here was a teenage girl who saw an opportunity to be a disciple, to be a servant, and that is more important than being bound by the rules.

That's what Jesus was doing that day. He was teaching the people that we are called to be vehicles through whom God's love and grace are experienced. And when those opportunities come, we need to be ready to tear up the rules.

There's one place I see myself in this story: I see myself being judgmental like these Pharisees, these keepers of the law.

But the other place I see myself in this story is lying there on that mat in front of Jesus. Here was someone who was totally helpless, totally dependent upon others. Here was a sinner in need of God's saving grace.

That's me...and that's you. When it comes to our salvation, we are helpless. We cannot do anything to bring about our salvation. We are totally dependent upon the love and grace of

our Savior, Jesus. Like the words of the old gospel song: “Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling.”

That’s what this Table is all about. When we come to this table, we come as sinners, in need of God’s saving grace. We are here, not because we deserve it but precisely because we do not deserve it. We are here because of the love and grace of Jesus. Here the hungry are fed; here broken people find healing; here sinners find God’s redeeming grace.

So let’s take the next few minutes of our worship to prepare ourselves to participate in this sacrament and to receive God’s amazing, forgiving grace.✠