

Breaking the Rules

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It seems that in addition to attracting crowds of devoted followers, Jesus also drew alongside him a few folks who were waiting for him to trip up and who were rooting for him to fail.

The gospels are full of stories where Jesus does something, or says something, and some seems to pop up from the back row to call him out for violating some law or rule.

Now it has been an unfortunate and inaccurate shorthand to think of these critics as representative of Judaism.

But remember that Jesus was born, lived, and died as a Jew. So any conflicts between his teaching and practices and other Jews in his time was akin to an internal Jewish conflict.

Not all of Judaism should be painted as Jesus opponents, in fact that way of thinking has had disastrous historical consequences that we are all aware of.

The people who called out Jesus were no more representative of Judaism at the time that Jesus himself was. Like every religion, before and since, there are always some inflexible fundamentalists.

So here Jesus encounters a woman who has been bent over, by the weight of life, unable to stand up straight, for 18 years.

She hears a voice calling to her, and she cannot even look up to see who it is, but she approaches this one who calls to her with words of healing and and hope, and Christ lays his hands upon her and she stands up straight, healed, restored, able now to look and see the face of the one who has set her free.

Just one problem.

It was the sabbath. The day of rest. And some took the opportunity to call Jesus out for breaking a rule. He healed on a day when he should not have healed. A day when he is meant to do no work at all.

Jesus answers the accusation with a question:

“Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?”

A little later on, he will face this accusation again, and he raises the stakes even further asking: “If one of you has a child that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull her out?”

So did Jesus just think the Sabbath was a bad idea, an outdated notion? Did he encourage his followers to ignore this, one of the 10 Commandments?

Of course not.

Jesus lived his life as a faithful Jew and almost certainly held the place of the Sabbath within that tradition in high esteem. Jesus said that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. He encourages people to keep the commandments their whole lives long.

Jesus is not being cavalier with the laws of his faith, or the normative rules that governed the life of his community.

What he is saying is that sometimes following the law is worse than breaking it. If your child fell in a well, you would pull them out without regard for whether lifting heavy objects were permitted on that day.

The simple fact of obedience to the letter of the law is not an acceptable excuse for inhumanity.

Encountering this woman who had suffered for over half her life, Jesus determined that one more day in that state was not worth obedience to the law of the sabbath, and so he broke the rules, for the sake of love.

The laws and rules that govern our shared life are an important bedrock to our ability to function as society. But every application of the law is still susceptible to moral critique.

In our American justice system, this is practiced primarily through the principal of prosecutorial discretion. Which is quite simply to say that we trust public officials to exercise their discretion in determining what charges to pursue, or whether to pursue charges at all in a criminal case.

And its not just prosecutors that are entrusted with discretion. A few weeks ago I got pulled over up there on Canton Ave for speeding. It's a 30 MPH zone, I think I was going 43. The officer used the discretion that the public has entrusted him with and decided not to write me a ticket.

Now it would not have been immoral or unjust for him to write me a ticket, he certainly would have been well within his rights. But he didn't.

We trust these public servants to use their judgement to determine what kind of actions serve the public interest, and to stop short of being needlessly punitive or harsh.

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In another moment when Jesus was confronted about his habit of healing people on the sabbath he said: "The sabbath was made for humanity, not humans for the sabbath."

The law was made to serve us. We were not made to serve the law.

The purpose of the application of law and justice is to serve the public good. Society does not exist to uphold the law. The law exists to uphold society.

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I bring this up because I worry that this important and productive tension between law and humanity, is getting out of balance.

I am hearing too many public officials speak as if they have no responsibility for making moral judgements in the conduct of their duties because what they are doing is technically legal.

And I am hearing too often the accusation that making moral objections to the way laws are being enforced means that the critic is advocating for lawlessness.

Saying that we should allow people to live safely in the United States while their asylum claims are being processed is not the same thing as asking for open borders.

And asking officers to consider impacts on people's children and communities as they plan their operations is not the same thing as asking them not to do their job.

We are asking for people in positions of public trust to use the minds and the hearts that God gave them to exercise some discretion and some compassion.

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It is a subject of reasonable political debate to consider how the public interest is best served in the enforcement of immigration laws. I have considered it. I know where I stand. I expect others disagree.

That is ok.

I am also not suggesting that we be cavalier or dismissive of the laws and rules that order our lives and our society. They are important.

But as Christians, we must remember that first and foremost we serve Jesus.

And Jesus, again and again in his life when given a choice between adherence to a law, and compassion for a hurting human chose compassion, again and again and again and without fail.

And this of course is not just an issue in our public and civic life. Each of us face moments in our lives where the letter of the rules comes into tension with our moral judgement.

Something might feel wrong, even though it is technically allowed.

Or the regulations and practices where we work, or learn, or live may demand something of us that we feel in our gut is wrong, even if we know that we will not be punished, and may even be celebrated for doing it.

Jesus was proving a point when he healed people on the sabbath. He did it over and over and over again, and never without facing rebuke and criticism from his own religious community.

The point he was making is that we cannot cede our moral imagination to rigid codes, rules, laws, and regulations.

God has given each of us that inner voice, that conscience, that knows when something is right, and when something is wrong.

And God has given us to one another in community to hold each other accountable, to challenge and question each other, to learn and grow together, so that we can learn to live in the world the way God hopes for each of us.

And so that we develop the courage to act on the principals of our faith, to live out of our compassionate hearts.

God gave us that gift.

And it is our responsibility, in all circumstances, to use it.