

“When the Rules Become Rulers”

Luke 13: 10-17

Harriet Sandmeier

July 15, 2007

Whenever I am to lead worship I try really hard to have my sermon prepared by mid-day Friday so I can let it rest awhile (kind of like kneaded bread dough), and then go back at it on Saturday and knock it back down, beat it up a bit and then let it rise again to become the final product.

I wasn't able to do that this week. In fact, at 8:30 yesterday morning I began to wonder if perhaps I should just lead a Bible study this morning on this powerful gospel lesson from Luke! So much is packed into these eight short verses that throughout the week I found myself taking off on several different approaches. Finally, Friday afternoon I stepped back and decided to visualize the story as a play, and looked at the cast of characters. The principals in this story are, of course, the bent-over woman, Jesus, the chief rabbi and the “crowd.” Oh yes, and then there's the “spirit” that we're told was *with* the woman and which had been the cause of her condition for eighteen years.

Let's briefly take a look at each of these characters and see if in our mind's eyes we can visualize both their physical beings and their behaviors.

Our story starts, of course, with Jesus teaching once again in the synagogue. So far so good. Jesus the teacher. Then his attention is drawn away from the teaching to the woman seeking his healing. Jesus the compassionate healer. Then, upon being chastised by the chief rabbi for breaking the rules of the Sabbath, Jesus calls a spade a spade and reveals the “holy ones” as frauds and hypocrites. Jesus the confronter.

Then there is the chief rabbi. Oh, it's easy to visualize him, isn't it? He is, after all, the *chief*...and we all know what that means! He's been vested with the authority to rule. And boy, does he know the rules!

Now the woman is a very interesting character. It's easy to visualize her bent over so profoundly that her eyes can only look down. She is just one of “the crowd” that has come seeking Jesus' healing powers, and yet she cannot even raise her head enough to see him. Unlike the woman at the well, this unnamed woman doesn't call out to Jesus.

She has come to the threshold apparently under her own power, but she doesn't single herself out. It's Jesus who spots her.

The "crowd" of course are the other outsiders who have come on the Sabbath to lay their particular afflictions at Jesus' feet. Certainly they know it is the Sabbath, but still their thirst for healing is so great that they risk the consequences of approaching the place where Jesus is.

Now I am fascinated by the persona of the spirit that has bowed the woman down for so many years. The Bible refers to the spirit as Satan. And that leads me to all kinds of speculation about who and what Satan really is. There is no indication in the story that the woman is carrying around evil. Nor is there indication that her crippled condition is punishment for some wrong-doing. Rather, it appears that slowly over time the woman became totally bent over and weighed down with the unjust burdens she was forced to bear.

This is really a story of order vs. ardor, isn't it? It's a story dripping with justice vs. injustice. It's a story of laws vs. love. It's a story that causes us to examine what happens when the rules become rulers. It is a story of and for today.

I really don't want a particular irony to escape you today. There is something quite ironic about the ecclesiastical officer of the presbytery - the Stated Clerk - preaching this lectionary text. And I join with you in smiling at this scenario.

As Stated Clerks, we are identified with this book – our denomination's *Book of Order*. We are, in fact, to function within the presbytery as the interpreters of "the Book." We're kind of the "keeper of the keys." My phone rings every working day with questions about Presbyterian polity and what "the Book" says and means. Whenever I conduct training for sessions someone is certain to refer to the *Book of Order* as the "rule book." I cringe when I hear this because while "the Book" seeks to order our church lives, the *Book of Order* is first and foremost a book of Reformed theology. The first four chapters of the section titled Form of Government speak not of rules and regulations, but of how Christ calls the Church into being, of the Great Ends of the Church, of the Church and its Confessions, of the Church and its Mission, and...*and...*of the Church and its unity. The chapters in the *Book of Order* are themselves ordered sequentially regarding importance. Therefore, Chapter One is *the* most important statement in the book. Chapter Two next and thus forward.

We aren't called to be regulators or enforcers. We are called to be Disciples!

But how we love our rules! And how we love our special niches...both in the church and in the world. I know folks who can get very bent out of shape — ah ha! Interesting imagery today, eh? Anyway, I know folks who can get very bent out of shape over something as earth-shaking as on which Saturday in the Fall the annual fair and dinner will be held! What? The third Saturday in October? We have *never* held the event any other time than the second Saturday in October! *We've never done it that way before!* When was the last time you heard that, or heard yourself say it?

Until recently, Thanksgiving was always held at our house. We are not a big family, but everyone would come to Cornwall and you-know-who cooked the big dinner. And I loved it. BUT! As they grew into their teens my three children conspired every year to make their mother a little bonkers. As everyone took his or her place at table and grace had been said, my kids would deliberately pass some things clockwise and others counterclockwise. Last week I talked a bit of what can upset my equilibrium. Well, trust me, these table shenanigans did just that! And it went on year after year...with the children who often disagreed about most everything else in life...smiling and winking at each other!

Finally! Finally! One year it hit me. How dumb had I been? And that year I put all of the food on the kitchen table and counters and had all serve themselves buffet style! And my son quipped, "We wondered how long it would take you to think of this!"

My rules and regulations – learned at over 20 Thanksgiving meals at my parents' table - called for a certain order of service. And when my children disrupted my sense of order I had to rethink the order.

Such it is, and always has been, with the laws and rules and regulations of the world. What is legal one day is confronted for its injustice at a later day, and laws and rules and regulations themselves change.

Let's go back to the woman with the bent back for a moment. I believe that years of exclusion and suppression were the spirit - the burdens - that crippled her. The laws of society have a way of dehumanizing us, just as surely as the laws of slavery dehumanize. Just as surely as the laws of control and persecution of Jews and Gypsies and Gays and the handicapped in Hitler Germany dehumanized. Just as surely as the laws of a church which denied ordination to women until the last fifty years dehumanized.

It is impossible for me to read this Gospel lesson without recalling Martin Luther King Jr's 1963 *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. You recall that it was addressed to "My Dear Fellow Clergymen." I cannot say that without observing that here, just 41 years ago, this incredible champion for human rights wrote a commanding and compelling response to those who had spoken out against breaking "the law" in totally sexist language! "Clergymen, Gentlemen, Sirs"...and concluded the letter with Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood!" What a striking example of how our understanding is ever-changing. King would never use this language today, but at that time he had no awareness of how exclusive he himself could be!

King's response to the clergy who railed against breaking the laws and who urged continued patience until some undetermined time at which somehow serendipitously justice would be secured was just as Jesus' response to the rabbi. He wrote, *You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us to consciously break laws. One may well ask, "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all."*

Every word in King's letter resonates today as it did in 1963. I am not going to read it in its entirety, but I remind you of these further words: *I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth concerning time in relation to the struggle for freedom. I have just received a letter from a white brother in Texas. He writes: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take a long time to come to earth."* King continued, *Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time itself is neutral; it can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on*

wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity...

Justice vs. injustice. In our study of the Bible and its call to us in *our time* we must examine commandment vs. love, and we must return to Jesus' ONE Great Commandment.....which is not at all about rules and regulations but about Love.

Religion without vision.....religion without love.....reduces us to the status of law keepers - or law breakers - classifying us according to what we believe or do not believe and categorizing us. Yes, this is the *Book of Order* of the Presbyterian Church (USA). It keeps getting fatter and fatter because one General Assembly after another tinkers with it so that it may reflect regulation rather than salvation; exclusion rather than inclusion. There are words in this book which are anathema to me. They are words of exclusion....words that are the words of men and women, not the words of Jesus Christ. And they must be removed if we are not to become bowed down under their painful injustice. We're called to step up to the plate for justice because Jesus has called *us* to be his heart and his hands as Disciples in the 21st century.

St. Augustine said it: *An unjust law is no law at all.*

Pope John XXIII said it: *We are not on earth to guard a museum, but to cultivate a flourishing garden of life.*

William Sloane Coffin said it: *There are those who prefer certainty to truth, those in church who put the purity of dogma ahead of the integrity of love. And what distortion of the gospel it is to have limited sympathies and unlimited certainties, when the very reverse - to have limited certainties and unlimited sympathies - is not only more tolerant but far more Christian.*

There is a story of a Sunday worship service being held in an affluent New York City church. As the service was underway a rather disheveled man came in, mumbling under his breath, and walked right up to sit in the front pew. The preacher began his sermon and the man began to yell "Hallelujah!" And "Praise God!" And "Thank you Jesus!" And "Amen!" The congregation became unnerved by these totally unfamiliar verbal outbursts and finally an usher came forward and sternly said, "You are disrupting this service and you

must leave.” The man looked at him and with a wide toothless grin said loudly, “I’ve got the Spirit!” The usher quickly responded, “Well, you didn’t get it here and now you’ve gotta leave!”

Hmmm. Something to think about.

Amen.