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8/25/19--University Presbyterian Church
Luke 13:10-17; Isaiah 58:9b-14

FOLLOWING THE RULES

I once saw a bent over woman. I was taking an out of town visitor to see Niagara Falls when a large family walked by us and one its members was a bent over woman. When I say she was bent over, I don't mean she was stooped the way some elderly people become. I mean this woman was completely bent at the waist, with her face looking straight down at her feet. Her family was having to guide her so she didn't run in to things. When I saw her I immediately thought about the story we read today in the Bible about the bent over woman Jesus heals. For the first time I could really appreciate how debilitating such a condition would be in a person's life. And I imagined what it would be like if someone were to lay their hands on the woman I saw, healing her and enabling her to suddenly stand up straight, and the rejoicing that would follow. It would be incredible!

However, after Jesus heals the bent over woman in the synagogue not everyone was rejoicing. The synagogue leader was greatly upset because Jesus had performed this healing on the Sabbath day--a day of rest when, according the rules, no work should be performed. The synagogue leader argues that Jesus has broken the Sabbath rules by healing the bent over woman when he should have waited to perform the healing on another day of the week.

We all can agree, I'm sure, that rules are important for any well-run society or community. Rules keep things fair. Rules create order. Good rules should reflect a community's values. And yet, it is also human nature to be more accepting of rules being broken when doing so somehow benefits us. When the store clerk gives us the sale price even though we forgot to bring along the coupon, we are generally pleased to have the rules broken. Imagine

for a minute that it was the synagogue leader's own child who was bent over. And imagine Jesus saying to him, "Well, I can heal your child today, the Sabbath day, or we can wait and do this tomorrow." I think we know what the leader's answer would be. No loving parent would want their child to suffer one more second if it could be helped.

Jesus reminds the synagogue leader that this bent over woman was also someone's beloved child. When Jesus refers to her as "a daughter of Abraham," referencing their shared ancestor Abraham, their shared father Abraham, who received God's special blessing, Jesus is saying to the leader, "this is a daughter of Abraham and she is part of *your* family. She too is a recipient of the blessing that comes down from God through Abraham. She too is a child of God. She is a member of your family."

But it seems that the synagogue leader didn't regard her that way. What did the leader see when he looked at this woman, if he even took time to notice her? Poor disabled women counted for nothing in that society, and they still don't. Did he just see one of society's "deplorables," people whose lives and concerns could be dismissed without any thought or consideration? Did he regard her condition as a sign of God's judgment, as many did in that society--a kind of blaming the victim that still takes place today? Did he dismiss her as someone who came from one of those dirty, rat-infested neighborhoods where no one in their right mind would want to live? Did he see someone who didn't deserve to be helped, someone who would be a waste of precious resources, resources that would be better directed to those who were capable of standing on their own two feet?

What did this synagogue leader see when he looked at this woman? What do *we* see when we look at the faces of immigrants in detention centers, or at the faces of those who come

to the food pantry, or at those who sometimes sleep under our church's overhang? What did the synagogue leader see when he looked at this woman?

Had this woman been someone he valued, don't you imagine he would have had a vastly different reaction to Jesus' Sabbath day healing of her? But she wasn't someone he valued and so all he could focus on was that "rules were broken!" The rules took precedence over compassion.

But here's the thing the synagogue leader got completely wrong: *no* rules were actually broken! Rules were *not* broken. In fact, the heart and soul of the Sabbath day were reinforced by the healing Jesus performs. Jesus didn't break any rules. He had tremendous respect and honor for the Sabbath day. He knew perfectly what the Sabbath day was all about and how best to honor God that day, and how best to honor God on every day.

If we stop to think about it, we will recall that the commandment to honor the Sabbath day was part of the Ten Commandments given to Moses and the people following their escape from slavery in Egypt. The people had finally escaped their terrible situation of bondage in Egypt when God gave them some rules to live by. These rules, these commandments, were not regarded as a burden but as gifts of liberation. And one of those commandments was the one to honor the Sabbath day. The people are told to honor the Sabbath day and to keep it holy. Rest was certainly part of that commandment--a glorious gift to a previously enslaved people who had been made to work day after day with no rest. But the commandment to observe the Sabbath was also linked with a remembrance of God's liberating act of love. On the Sabbath day the people were told to remember how they had been slaves in Egypt and how God rescued them from their affliction. Thus, compassion and liberation lie at the very heart of the Sabbath commandment.

Jesus even reminds the synagogue leader that the Sabbath day rules permit people to untie an ox or donkey and lead it to water, as an act of compassion to the animal. Thus, there could be no more fitting way to honor God, the God of liberating love and compassion, than to heal this afflicted woman on the Sabbath day.

Jesus doesn't break the rules when he heals this woman. Rather, Jesus reinforces the rules by which the people of God are to live. God's people, and that includes us Christians here today, are given a different set of rules to live by. We are to live by the rule of compassion that is rooted in God's love. We are to live by the rule of liberation that is rooted in God's love. We are to live by the rule of forgiveness that is rooted in God's love. We are to live by the rule of generosity that is rooted in God's love. These rules apply to our personal relationships with one another. And these rules apply when we enter the voting booth. These rules apply when we contemplate how to spend our money and our time. These rules apply when we gather as a faith community and decide on our ministries. These rules take precedence over every other rule.

There are so many ways in which people are bent over and pushed down by life's circumstances and by cruelty and by injustice. Maybe you have known such a time in your life, a time when you were bent over by the burdens of life, or by the burdens of your heart, or by the burdens of your mind. Was there ever such a time when you were bent over and someone came along and helped you stand up straight again? Maybe they helped you in some tangible way. Maybe they forgave you. Maybe they just loved you steadfastly through a hard time. When did someone's love or care or attention or forgiveness help you stand up straight again?

There are so many ways in which people are pushed down and pushed out of the circle of care and compassion: when they are told they don't merit attention or care because of their status or color or income level, or when they are told they are illegal and invalid, or when they come

from corners of the earth that are not respected. Bent over people are all around. And sometimes societal rules sanction ignoring them or blaming them or rejecting them.

But Christians follow a different set of rules. We follow the rules that Jesus followed--the rules of compassion and the rules of liberation grounded in the love of God. These rules are grounded in the idea that every other person is also a beloved child of God, members of our family, someone who deserves to be liberated from oppression and suffering. There is this tendency in our world and in our nation at the moment to think like the synagogue leader, to forget that every other person is kin to us, a sister, a brother, because we are all children of the great Creator.

In the passage from Isaiah today, we hear God tell the people: "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom will be like the noonday."

Scientists debate what makes human beings human--what distinguishes us from other creatures. Is it tool making? Is it language? Some claim that what makes us human is when some six million years ago our ape-like ancestors stood up straight and began walking upright. This ability to stand up straight was not an overnight accomplishment. Gradually, over millions of years the leg bones had to adjust to walking upright. Then the knees had to adapt. Finally the structure of the feet had to evolve so that we humans can walk as we do today. But those of us gathered here today know that what truly makes us human is not merely a matter of bones and muscles and cartilage. Jesus shows us that what truly makes us human, what enables us to stand up straight, are God's liberating gifts of love and compassion.