



Sunday, Jan. 31, 2021
Sermon Series: Love in Action

Love Sometimes Breaks the Rules
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Luke 6:1-11 NRSV

One sabbath while Jesus was going through the cornfields, his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands, and ate them. ²But some of the Pharisees said, "Why are you doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" ³Jesus answered, "Have you not read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? ⁴He entered the house of God and took and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and gave some to his companions?" ⁵Then he said to them, "The Son of Man is lord of the sabbath."

⁶On another sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught, and there was a man there whose right hand was withered. ⁷The scribes and the Pharisees watched him to see whether he would cure on the sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. ⁸Even though he knew what they were thinking, he said to the man who had the withered hand, "Come and stand here." He got up and stood there. ⁹Then Jesus said to them, "I ask you, is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" ¹⁰After looking around at all of them, he said to him, "Stretch out your hand." He did so, and his hand was restored. ¹¹But they were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.

Most of us learned rules when we were growing up. A few that I remember: 1) Say grace before meals; 2) Wash your hands after going to the bathroom; 3) Don't work on Sunday; and 4) Tell the truth.

Any of these sounds familiar? I'm guessing we could have a lively discussion about the rules that have shaped our lives. And, I'm guessing the conversation would get even livelier if we discussed which rules we religiously kept, which we sometimes didn't, and why.

I'll admit, there was something inside me that often wanted to look for contingencies, for loopholes, to those rules: 1) Say grace before meals - but what if we're out in a restaurant where others can see us? 2) Wash your hands - but what if there isn't soap or a towel? 3) Don't work on Sunday -

but what if a storm is coming and the corn is still in the field? 4) Tell the truth - but what if the truth might hurt someone's feelings. You know what I mean: *Do I look fat in this dress?* Or here's one that's harder: *Can you forgive me for what I've done?*

In ancient Israel, a group called the Pharisees had a job to do: to keep track of the rules connected with Jewish law and to make sure everyone was keeping them. The Pharisees were usually connected with a local synagogue. For you rule-keepers out there, this might sound like a dream job. But for those who, like me, were sometimes looking for loopholes, you might have wanted to avoid the Pharisees like the plague. I mean, who really wants to be hounded about what you should or shouldn't be doing with your life.

In case you're wondering, there were more than 10 commandments in Judaism, far more. In fact, there were 613 of them. Luke's Gospel generally pictures Jesus as a law-abiding citizen. He goes with his parents to the Temple in Jerusalem. He worships in the synagogue on the sabbath. He heals a leper and then instructs him to show himself to the priest, as the law requires.

Keeping the law was a big deal in the first century. It was the center of their identity as a people. When Luke was written, some 50 or so years after the time of Jesus, the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Romans. There were no more sacrifices to offer. If you wanted to connect with God, you needed to focus on those 613 commandments. Observing them was a way to keep the faith, to preserve one's community, and to protect oneself from compromise and foreign influence.

The most important commandments revolved around mealtime customs and keeping the sabbath holy. Think lutefisk and lefse, and not spaghetti and meatballs. Think going to church and not using the day simply to catch up on emails and watch football. In a changing world, these commandments helped Israel maintain who they were as a nation.

Then along comes this new rabbi named Jesus. He's wildly popular with the people. But there's a problem: many of those who come to him have needs and concerns. They clamor for Jesus' attention. Keeping dietary practices and sabbath rules are anything but easy. In a nutshell, Jesus seems willing to play fast and loose with the rules. He sits down to dinner with just about anyone. And he's often ready to stop teaching on the sabbath and heal the sick, a task that could surely wait another day - right?

What kind of rabbi is he, anyway? Is he just looking for loopholes? We all know folks like that. They never met a rule they couldn't bend or break, and they often come up with a flimsy excuse for why. The scribes and Pharisees

are beginning to wonder if that's who Jesus is. More and more people are flocking to see him. If they'd had cell phone cameras back then, Jesus would have been the subject of "breaking news" all the time.

Even as I say this, let me put in a positive word for the Pharisees. Believe it or not, their intentions were good. They were committed to helping people do God's will in every situation twenty-four hours a day. And sure, sometimes *they* arranged for contingencies too – if a donkey needed water, if a child fell in a well – you did what you needed to do, even if it was the sabbath.

Here's the problem: what happens if you focus more on the rules than on the people you're trying to help? What happens if Jesus is focused on helping people too, and his viewpoint is different than yours? I can tell you what happens: controversy. Suddenly the scribes and Pharisees are determined to keep a close eye on Jesus.

One sabbath, the disciples are on the move. They're hungry. There isn't a Golden Arches to be found. So, in keeping with the custom of the day, the disciples are allowed to go into a field and pick some grain. But they go further. They rub it between their hands and come up with a snack.

The Pharisees are watching. They clearly don't like it. It's the sabbath! It's work! The disciples should have planned ahead! When confronted about their behavior, Jesus appeals to ancient tradition, to a time when King David and his men entered the worship space and ate the Bread of Presence. And Jesus' point? Like his disciples, David and his men were hungry– they had a pressing human need. To drive home the point, Jesus adds: "The Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath."

Jesus is making a strong assertion. He's claiming to be superior to Sabbath laws. I can't imagine that went over well. As lord of the sabbath, Jesus can determine when, where, and how the rules apply. For Jesus' followers, that means his words and his actions determine how they are to live on the Sabbath. Mind you, Jesus isn't saying to treat the day cavalierly. We need a day of rest. Then again, providing for a pressing human need like hunger can be important too.

On another sabbath, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue. The scribes and Pharisees are watching him even more closely. There's a man with a withered hand. *Will Jesus try to heal him? He should wait till the next day!* Within earshot of the religious leaders, Jesus asks: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath?" Clearly Jesus has "good" in mind. He tells the man to stretch out his hand, and he heals him." The scribes and Pharisees are furious. The controversy is growing. The pot is beginning to boil.

What's going on? Is Jesus overstepping his bounds again? Is he simply looking for loopholes? I think it's more personal than that. Jesus is saying that it's *never* the wrong day to help someone in need.

So, what are we to make of Jesus' actions? I don't think he's intentionally taunting the religious leaders. Rather, he's meeting people in the middle of their often-messy lives. Love comes pouring out of his heart. The love he shares sometimes goes beyond the letter of the law. He sometimes breaks the rules. Meeting genuine human need – such as sickness and hunger, such as isolation and loneliness – takes on primary importance.

Friends, we need to be careful in reading stories like these. It's easy to paint a picture of Jesus as someone who routinely takes matters into his own hands, who regularly gets in the face of the powers-that-be whenever a decision doesn't suit his needs. Add in the story of Jesus cleansing of the temple, and you've got a subversive Jesus who's willing to do whatever it takes to fight for a cause.

Here's why this is important: As we seek to come to grips with the assault on our nation's capitol on January 6, the Day of Epiphany, we'll be spending time arguing over how to interpret Jesus. What kind of leader was Jesus when confronting the scribes and Pharisees? What were his intentions as he as he overturned the tables of the moneychangers? The January 6 crowd storming the capitol appeared to be acting in Jesus' name -- carrying Christian crosses, banners proclaiming *Jesus Saves*, American flags, even a "Camp Auschwitz" hoodie. We need to be asking ourselves: Is that the way we understand Jesus?

Some people quickly blamed antifa. It was a convenient way to deflect responsibility, a way to say that *our* side couldn't possibly have been responsible for such an atrocity. Really, though, antifa carrying Confederate flags and Christian crosses? They might as well have been singing *Onward Christian Soldiers* too.

In the coming weeks, we need to learn more about Christian nationalism, and especially White Christian Nationalism. Quite likely, they were the ones storming the capitol. While we're at it, we should learn more about white evangelicalism too. They're often closely related.

Philip Gorski of Yale University describes the thinking of Christian Nationalism this way: "America was founded as a Christian nation; the Founding Fathers were evangelical Christians; the nation's laws and founding documents were based on biblical principles, or even directly inspired by God. America's power and prosperity are due to its piety and obedience." *That* is a striking claim!

A little like ancient Israel, when faced with a changing world, people feel a need to keep the faith, to preserve our community, and to protect ourselves from compromise and foreign influence. If we need to fight to do it, then we'll fight! And shed blood as well! We'll grab a cross and our *Jesus' Saves* sign, and march on the capitol.

Is that the Jesus you know? Again, we need to be very careful in parsing out these stories. Yes, Jesus had confrontations with the religious leaders. Yes, he did find loopholes in the law, much like the Pharisees themselves did. But for Jesus, his actions seemed rooted, not in gaining power, but in demonstrating love. We heard it first in his sermon at Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free."

As I see it, at every turn, Jesus was concerned with meeting genuine human need. His heart was big. He had room for a Samaritan who acted like a neighbor. He had room in for Gentiles as well as for Jews. He had room, even on the sabbath, for hungry disciples and a man with a withered hand. No doubt his actions stirred controversy. There's a reason he ended up on a cross. But again, this wasn't about power but about love.

In many ways, we stand at a crossroads in our country. Charles Kimball of Oklahoma University writes: "History clearly shows that religion has often been linked directly to the worst examples of human behavior. It is somewhat trite, but nevertheless sadly true, to say that more wars have been waged, more people killed, and these days more evil perpetuated in the name of religion than by any other institutional force in human history."

Friends, we've got work to do. Getting to know the Jesus we read about in the gospels is an important first step. Keep reading. Ask Jesus to guide you in figuring out which rules are important, which ones aren't, and why. Then trust him to show you the way. Amen.