

ELEVENTH SUNDAY OF PENTECOST | SERMON

Luke 13:10-17 | August 25, 2019 | Rev. Catherine Healy | Church of St. Paul & the Redeemer

As far as I could tell growing up, being a Christian was mostly about rules. There were rules about when to go to church, and rules about what you did when you got there. Rules for which prayers to say and how often to say them. There were even rules about how to apologize to God when you broke the rules, which I seemed to do more often than not.

And I loved these rules. I wanted to learn the calendar of holy days and the words to all the prayers. I loved the order that the church brought to my life; through that order, I felt God's presence. I wanted to see God at work in the world, and the rites and rhythms of the church helped my vision come into focus.

Then I got a little older. And I started to run into other kinds of rules.

Rules for whom you could date and how you could date. Rules for what you could or could not, but mostly could not, do as a woman in the church. Rules about marriage and divorce that seemed arbitrary and cruel.

And then I started to read more history. I learned about the culpability of Christians in so many different kinds of violence, from long ago to the present day.

Suddenly, those rules I had once loved felt sinister, like a brilliant way for religious leaders to control and shame everyone else into compliance. In my case, these leaders were Catholic, but in no way do I intend to single out the Catholic Church—I know too many other

people from too many other faith traditions who have had these feelings too.

And I thought: *Why did I ever want to be a part of this?*

Why did I think these rules had anything to teach me?

And so for a while, I wanted to reject all of them. I wasn't ready to give up on Jesus, but I was all done with the strictures of the church. Like so many other reformers, I wanted to get back to a Christianity that was pure and real, uncontaminated by history—as though we can ever get away with ignoring our history.

But sometimes I did think back on the holy moments of my childhood, and I found something odd about some of those rules. I missed them.

Today's Gospel is a complicated story about rules and how we know when it is right or wrong to follow them. It's the Sabbath day, and Jesus is in the synagogue, teaching. There appears a woman with a spirit that has kept her bent over for eighteen years—an interesting detail. Eighteen is a powerful number in Jewish tradition, because it represents *chai*, the Hebrew word for life.¹ But for this woman, the symbol is warped. For eighteen years, this spirit has kept her life constrained.

Jesus heals her with the laying on of hands and immediately draws the anger of the synagogue leader, who correctly infers that Jesus is doing this to make a point. That point is made even clearer in the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus tells the Pharisees, "The sabbath was

¹ MJL, [What Is the Meaning of Chai?](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/what-is-the-meaning-of-chai/), MyJewishLearning.com.

made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath."²

We have to be careful in our reading here. It's too easy to think that Jesus is rejecting the customs of Jewish law. But that's not what's going on.

Jesus is offering a caution to two different groups. One is the group of people who want to adhere unthinkingly to religious rules, or, worse, to weaponize those rules as instruments of shame and control.

But the other is the group that wants to do away with the rules altogether. Jesus never suggests that he wants to abolish the Sabbath. Rather, his point is that the Sabbath does not exist for its own sake. It serves a greater purpose, and sometimes it is that very purpose that requires us to break the rules. This principle turns out to be completely consistent with Jewish teaching. Four hundred years after Jesus, it will be codified into the Talmud: The purpose of the Sabbath is to be life-giving, so it is always permissible to break the Sabbath in order to save a life.³

Jesus is trying to teach his followers how to approach the law: not to follow it unthinkingly, or reject it summarily, but to stop and consider the greater purpose it serves.

We do well to consider this in the church. Sometimes those purposes turn out not to be God's purposes at all, but the purposes of human leaders who may not always be acting in good faith. In the Episcopal Church and many others, women were long banned from

ordination for reasons that turned out not to stand up to theological scrutiny. And so the rule was changed.

Sometimes the purpose is good but the law is not helping us realize it. Our tradition teaches that the purpose of the Eucharist is to draw us into deeper union with God. The Episcopal Church has long held that baptism is a prerequisite for receiving communion, but here at St. Paul & the Redeemer, that rule began to seem like a barrier to realizing the greater purpose. And so that rule, too, was changed.

And sometimes the law does exactly what it's meant to do. Jesus understood what it took me too long to figure out: Some of our rules are life-giving. Look around you right now. Two thousand years after Jesus taught in the synagogue, we hold onto certain customs about how and when we come together to pray—not because we fear punishment, but because those rhythms give us a road map for our journey toward and with God. Those are the rules we hold onto. They give us life. They make us whole.

As we welcome the SPR youth home from their mission trip, where they learned about the cultures of Native communities in Minnesota and began to explore questions of how settlers can pursue reconciliation and make reparations with indigenous people, I think especially about the example set for us by Native American Christians. Native people have every historical reason to reject the strictures of Christianity: Many were treated brutally in Indian residential schools run by missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant,⁴ and Christian evangelism continues to be used as a tool to assimilate Native people and erase their culture.

² Mark 2:27.

³ Rabbi Simon Glustrom, [Saving a Life \(Pikuach Nefesh\)](#), MyJewishLearning.com.

⁴ For more on this chapter of Native history, see James W. Fraser, *Between Church and State: Religion and Public Education in a Multicultural America*, chapter 5: "Native American Religion, Christian Missionaries, and Government Schools, 1819–1978."

And yet, there are many Native Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, who believe it is possible to decolonize Christianity—to hold to the greater purpose of the Christian story, while stripping away the rules and customs imposed on them by white leaders acting in bad faith. This summer, I've been reading Native theologian Richard Twiss, who writes that much of what Native people were taught to think of as "Christian" culture is actually white American culture.⁵ But, he says, Native people are much, much wiser than the white missionaries gave them credit for. They have found ways to hold onto what is beautiful and true in the way of Jesus, and set aside the laws that are not life-giving.

Last week, our youth saw first-hand the beauty and mystery that comes from this approach to the law. I'm quoting now from their mission trip blog:

"We [went] to a predominantly native Catholic Church, Church of Gichitwaa Kateri. [With our hosts, we] talked about everything from Anishinaabe treaty rights to cultural fusion in Catholicism ... To prepare for our conversation, [our host] smudged the room with sage ... to prepare both the space and the people for a sacred ceremony. What we saw after the smoke cleared was a beautiful theological mosaic with tiles of all shapes and sizes. The center piece of this mosaic was a medicine lodge made out of red willow branches with bags of medicine tied on to it. Inside this holy site was a bear skin used to keep the Eucharist materials and other important artifacts. The lodge itself is taken down and ceremonially rebuilt during holy week."⁶

We rewrite the rules and customs that no longer serve their purpose in our time, in our place, in our culture. We keep the ones that give us life.

May we find the same courage within ourselves to take a good, long look at the laws we were raised with, and discern carefully which to follow and which to set aside, that we may live more fully into the Jesus way.

⁵ Richard Twiss, *Rescuing the Gospel from the Cowboys: A Native American Expression of the Jesus Way*.

⁶ Read the rest of the SPR youth mission trip blog on the [SPR Facebook page](#).