

JESUS THE LAWBREAKER

A Sermon by Rev. Joann H. Lee
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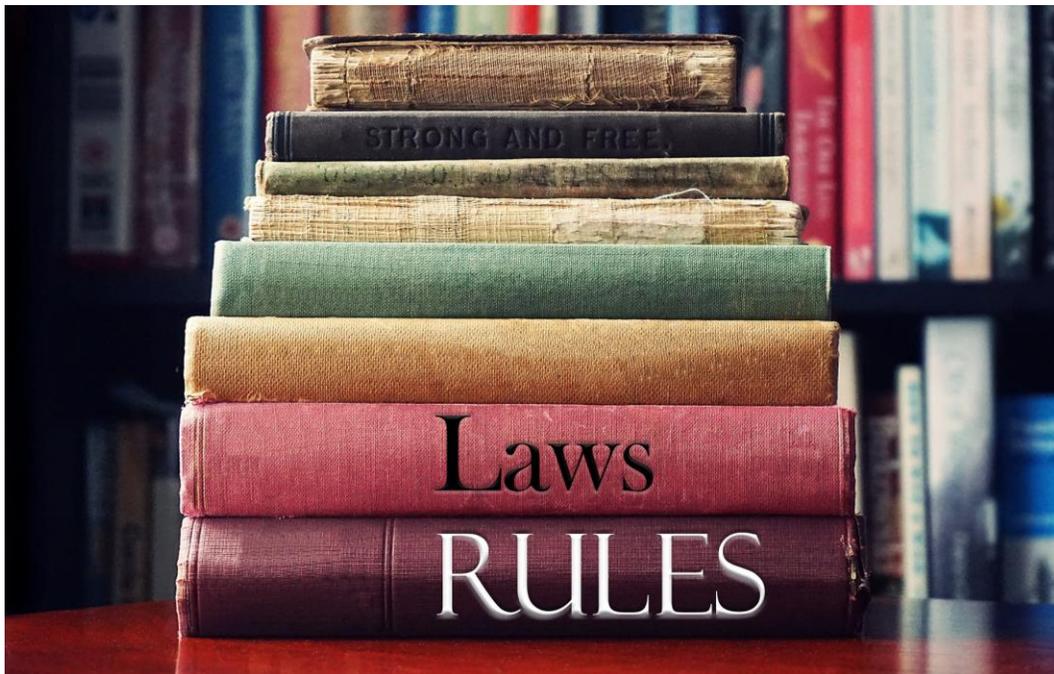
Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When

Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her,

immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! 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? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.



MY GUESS IS that most of us are here this morning because at some point in our lives, like this woman from scripture, we were bent over, unable to stand upright, broken from the weight of whatever ailed us.

MAYBE IT WAS AN ADDICTION; maybe it was the lure of perfectionism or achievement; maybe it was the call of capitalism and running the rat race; maybe it was self-doubt or self-hate; but something ailed us to the bone so that we could not stand upright. And like this woman, Jesus found us and set us free, granting us a new hope, a new life, a possibility to live as transformed people. For some of us this change was dramatic, completely and utterly life-changing. But for others, it was a smaller course-correction, a reminder to let go of that ego or sense of self-preservation, and to give back to God and to the world. Either way, I hope that you have met this Jesus who is willing to break the rules to bring each of us healing.

IF YOU ARE CURIOUS about this Jesus, if you are seeking the kind of love and grace and transformation that is offered, I know that Victor or Cal or I would be more than willing to talk to you about that. It would be a great joy and privilege, in fact. We are all the bent-over woman; or have been at some point in our lives. But my guess is, some of us have also been like the leaders of the synagogue mentioned in today's scripture: perturbed that rules are being broken, that tradition isn't being kept, that the way we've always done things are changing.

THESE RELIGIOUS LEADERS are often painted in such a negative light, as the villains of the gospel story. And, no doubt, they do and have done some awful and unjust things. But as someone who has now been a religious leader, ordained for nearly a decade, within a tradition that has existed for over 500 years, I have become rather sympathetic to some of these religious leaders.

THEY'RE NOT SAYING DON'T HEAL THE WOMAN, they're saying, "There are six other days when this woman could have come to receive healing. Any of those other days would have been fine. So why is she coming on the one day that we have off?" And this one day, this sabbath day, isn't just a rule made up by people for their own convenience, but it is a rule established by God at the creation of the world. Is it too much to ask that people just follow these guidelines?

They've been communicated. People know what they are. They're in the bulletin and on the website. Can't we just do things "decently and in order"? Is that too much to ask? These religious leaders: sure, they're not perfect. But are they so unreasonable? I mean, churches have made a bigger stink about whether or not there should be screens in the sanctuary, or whether or not we ordain those who are LGBTQIA, and Jesus never said anything about either of those things.

NOW BEFORE I MOVE ON, I feel like I have to emphasize that no, we are not considering putting screens in our sanctuary, not at the moment any way. And I know I have to stop and take the time to say this because for some of you, that's all you'll be thinking about if I don't assuage your worries right now. So, hear me on this, we are not considering screens in the sanctuary. But see? That feeling you got: that tightness in your chest, that panic in your heart, that wall in your brain that went up as soon as I said "screens"? That's how some of those religious leaders felt when Jesus decided to heal someone on the sabbath! All kidding aside, it really was unthinkable and unacceptable what Jesus did. He was breaking hundreds of years of tradition, breaking a law the authorities believed was established by God at the beginning of time. And who was he but a thirty-something year old son of a carpenter!

ADMITTEDLY, particularly in this story, the leader of the synagogue is, to me, quite relatable. But whether we relate more this morning to the woman who received healing or to the indignant leader who is upset about the healing, we are all called to be like Jesus. That's what it means to be a Christian, to be like Christ, to model ourselves after the life and way of Jesus the Christ. And no, we will never be Jesus. We are not to think of ourselves as the savior or the second coming of God-incarnate, but we are called to be like Jesus, to be the hands and feet of Christ, to order our lives and our priorities such that they reflect the heart of God. And Jesus, in this story, sees someone who is suffering and without thought to the rules or the norms of his day, he sets her free from her oppression.

JESUS VALUED PEOPLE OVER RULES. And he didn't come to break the law but to fulfill it, and the law of God, ultimately, is and always has been: LOVE. As citizens of this country, we are expected to follow the laws of the land. But as citizens of the household of God, we are also expected to follow the law of love, compassion, and justice. Unfortunately, the two don't always align. What is legal is too often a matter of power and who's got that power, rather than a matter of justice.

We all know that slavery was legal, and freeing slaves was criminalized.

The Holocaust was legal, and hiding Jews was criminalized.

Apartheid was legal, and protesting the system was criminalized.

The Japanese internment was legal, and refusing to go willingly was criminalized.

But none of it was moral or right or how God would want us to live.

JESUS, IN MARK SAYS, "the sabbath was made for humankind; not humankind for the sabbath," (Mark 2:27). In other words, laws and rules should be made for the flourishing of *all* humankind, not for the oppression or further marginalization of any peoples. Now, I would never advocate that any one of us go and break the law. But I do think as followers of Jesus, we are required to critically engage with the law and to examine how and where it might be causing harm, especially to those who are the most vulnerable among us.

WHAT IS RIGHT IS NOT ALWAYS LEGAL. And what is legal is not always right. And being a follower of Jesus doesn't make our lives easier; in fact, sometimes it complicates things. But it also fills our lives with love, an outpouring of love, given to us and given to the world, so that our sense of what is right is not determined by our laws but by a deep love for humanity. In the past few years, there has been a spike in prosecutions for people providing humanitarian aide in the Sonoran Desert. A group called *No Mas Muertes*, or No More Deaths, has long been providing water and food in the desert for those migrants who are crossing through the desert with hopes of starting a new life in this country. There have been bodies found of people who have tried to make the trek, over 8000 bodies in the past 20 years. And yes, while what these migrants are doing is not legal, they are also human beings who do not deserve to die of starvation and dehydration if it can be prevented. So this group, called No More Deaths, tries to give them a living chance. Now it is important to note that many migrants have actually chosen the legal way to enter our country, which is to cross at a port of entry. But we know there is actually very little incentive to do it the legal way because then you are given a number, and expected to wait, for who knows how long, sometimes having your children ripped away from you in the process. And there are days when only one or absolutely no numbers are called, so people have no idea when it will be their turn to get a chance at starting a new life. You could be waiting days, weeks, or even months! So, if you're fleeing your home to escape death, and the legal way to do it seems fruitless, you may consider some alternate options, even if it's dangerous.

IN 2017 and recently this past June, volunteers for No More Deaths who have left water and food in the desert to keep people from dying have been charged as criminals. Four women were prosecuted in 2017 after a three-day bench trial at a federal court in Tucson. They faced up to six months in prison and were found guilty of violating “the national decision to maintain the Refuge in its pristine nature,” essentially for littering. “Catherine Gaffney, a volunteer for No More Deaths, said the guilty verdict challenges all ‘people of conscience throughout the country’” She asks, “If giving water to someone dying of thirst is illegal, what humanity is left in the law of this country?”^[1] And just this June, Scott Warren faced up to 20 years in prison for providing humanitarian aide. Scott is a volunteer with No More Deaths and has a day job teaching geography. He says, “Geographers research and write about places,” but to him, making the place where you live “more humane, more just” is also part of the job.^[2] While putting water out in the desert, he found migrants in desperate condition and helped them by providing shelter, water, some medical attention, and food.

HIS TRIAL WAS MORE COMPLICATED, charged with harboring, and as a result brought a lot of media attention and support throughout the country from faith leaders and NGOs. The trial ended with a hung jury, four jurors convinced of his guilt, and eight convinced of his innocence. Our government has chosen to retry the case later this year. The Red Cross and the United Nations asserts that humanitarian aide should never be a crime, that granting people access to basic human needs: water, food, shelter and bandages for cuts, should not be criminalized. And yet, here we are as a nation, prosecuting people who are doing just that.

NOW, YOU AND I MAY DISAGREE about how to address immigration in this country. But when people are dying, literally dying on land we have claimed as part of our country, and we know that death is preventable by providing just some water and some food, I just don’t know how we can justify doing otherwise. When Jesus saw pain, when Jesus saw death of the soul or of the body, he never hesitated to reach out. His impulse was always of compassion. Now, I know we are not Jesus. We are trying to be as much like Christ as possible, but we simply are not. And while Christ could just reach out and bring healing, we may wonder, “If and when we encounter the bent-over woman, how might we best offer our help?” Because I don’t think the issue is that we don’t care or don’t want to help. It’s more often we don’t know how best to help or what to do.

Should we take her to a hospital and pay for her medical bills?

Should we call congress and our lawmakers to make sure that health care is affordable and available to all?

Should we give money to research so that no one else has to suffer the way she has?

Should we offer education and raise awareness, so that others know about this particular illness and feel compelled to do more about it or at least know how to best respond to someone who is suffering in the same way?

In my opinion, the only right answer to all of those questions is yes.

YES. All of those things are needed. And some of us may have more energy, gifts, and passion to do one of them more than the other. And that’s what’s amazing about being part of a faith community. Together we are the Body of Christ, and we don’t have to be responsible for everything on our own. We can work together, check in with each other, encourage one another, and find out who’s doing what. What’s been covered and where might you or I fit in to best offer help, healing, and hope?

I REALLY THINK coffee hour might be a great time to check in with each other and ask: “what’s one thing we’ve each done this week that brought us hope, that may have made a difference, that we pray was helpful in healing a broken world?” And if sometimes the answer is simply, “I took some time to care for myself and rest, so that I am better equipped to give back next week, that’s totally fine.” We as humans all experience what psychologists call “compassion fatigue.” That’s when we are so inundated with the pain and suffering of the world that we lose the emotional energy needed to deal with it. The biggest problem of this is that it makes us less compassionate; we start to build up walls and barriers to protect ourselves.^[3] Interestingly, one of things that can help us when facing compassion fatigue, is to just try doing *something*.

SO YES, sometimes, we will just need to rest, care for ourselves, building up some energy and strength, but I would hope that most weeks, we could come together in Calvin Hall and share one thing we saw, noticed, did, or said that may have

^[1] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/01/20/they-left-food-water-migrants-desert-now-they-might-go-prison/?noredirect=on>

^[2] <https://theintercept.com/2019/08/10/scott-warren-trial/>

^[3] <http://www.nationalcompass.net/2018/11/11/is-america-suffering-from-compassion-fatigue/>

contributed to the healing and compassionate ministry of Jesus in this day and in this context. And it is my hope that as we share, not to boast, but to encourage and inspire one another, we can see how we, as the Body of Christ together, really can and do make a wholistic impact on the world. And if we realize that we're not, to consider ways we could better do so.

I ENCOURAGE YOU TODAY, to go into Calvin Hall, have some coffee and a treat, and find someone you may or may not know, introduce yourself if necessary, and just share, what's one way you may have furthered the love and justice of God this week. I'll share mine with you now because I have a gathering of the Women of Calvary after the service, so I won't be in Calvin Hall for too long. And again, I share not to boast, in fact this is a such tiny, little, small thing that any one of us could do it, and if anything, just shows how very little your pastor is capable of. But I share it because I think sharing with each another is one tangible way we can actually bring hope to one another, to inspire one another, and to encourage one another. So this week, my oldest child started kindergarten. As a family, we highly value public education and are committed to public schools. And yesterday, I sent an email to Austin's kindergarten teacher. I told her how grateful I was that she chose to teach in the San Francisco Unified School District. I shared how much I admire her dedication and her strength to continue working as a teacher in this day and age. And I offered to come in once a month on Fridays, which are my days off, to help with whatever she might need.

NOW, there are other things I could've done as someone committed to public education: I could've written to Betsy DeVos; I could've researched the lottery policy of SFUSD and suggested better ways to do that; I could've fulfilled a teacher's wish-list to ensure they have everything they need and want for the year. There are so many ways I could have expressed the importance of education and contributed to making a difference. But this was *one*, small way, that I, as a parent of two young kids, felt that I could handle doing for this week. It's not much, and I know that. But maybe just saying this aloud will encourage some of you to actually write to Betsy DeVos or to find ways to change policy. That's what the church is capable of doing, together. We each play some kind of role, and together, we *can* be the Body of Christ bringing healing and wholeness to this world that God so loves. And so, I share this Prayer of Oscar Romero (who was also a law-breaker, by the way) to remind us, that while we cannot do it all, we are all called to do something. Listen now to these words of hope and healing:

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent
enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.

Friends, this is our call; this is our hope.
Thanks be to God.

AMEN.