

Law or Legalism

Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you had to make a decision between what you are supposed to do and what you should do? A situation where both decisions are right and choosing one would put you in trouble from not choosing the other choice? For example, if you are rushing to the hospital to take a loved one to the emergency room, do you stop for the stop signs and follow the speed limits? If you follow the traffic laws, then you might not make it to the hospital in time. If you don't follow the traffic laws, then you risk getting a ticket. Or, in a less life or death situation, you are headed to a job interview and are running late, do you push the speed limit to get there on time, or do you follow the speed limit, yet risking losing the job because you are late?

Today's Gospel text is another example of this conflict between doing what one has to do is and what one should do. According to the laws regarding the Sabbath, one could not do any work on the Sabbath, following the commandment from God to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. In giving the commandment, God wanted humanity to remember that God is the creator of all things, that all of life is a result of God's love and desire to have relationships and also as a reminder that on the seventh day of creation, God rested. God recognized the need for rest and reconnection with God, thus the commandment. So, in order to make it clear, the Jewish people defined what constituted work and thus what was allowable and what was forbidden. This resulted in a legalism which defined how far you could walk before it was considered 'work,' (thus the expression a 'Sabbath day's walk'); that you could not cook anything but you could reheat an already prepared meal and the like. It evolved to the point where the Pharisees believed that if every Jew kept all the Sabbath laws for two consecutive Sabbaths, then they could induce

the Messiah to come. So, when Jesus did something that was considered to be work, the religious authorities were, in their minds, justifiably upset.

The legalism regarding the Sabbath that evolved allowed for someone to work at saving someone else's life and that basically everything else should be done on one of the other days of the week. Even the reading from the 58th chapter of Isaiah talks about this. Speaking to those who would be going back to the Promised Land after the Babylonian Exile, Isaiah reports the Lord's words to those who will be returning. Knowing the enormous task ahead of the Israelites in rebuilding Jerusalem and the country, the Lord reminds them of the importance of keeping the Sabbath holy. The Lord even goes so far as to tell the people that they shouldn't even plan what they are going to do the rest of the week. God promises them that if they follow these, then God will bless them. So, it became the responsibility of the religious leaders to help the people to keep this mandate.

On the other hand, there is what we should do, namely, help others who are in need. Jesus acted on the side of the law that cared for the 'widows, orphans and the alien among them.' In other words, God's desire also prescribed that we take care of those who, regardless of the circumstances that put them in their situation, are at the fringes of society, those who cannot take care of themselves. Through Jesus' actions, we can conclude that the responsibility of taking care of people takes precedent over following a set of rules, especially man-made rules. We could make a case that it is even better to do something that God wants us to do, to help restore others to a relationship with the community if we do this on a Sabbath day instead of any other day of the week. In His reply to the leader of the synagogue, Jesus hints that those Sabbath laws almost have it backwards. We should be helping others come to God on the Sabbath, especially given the reaction of the lady. Her reaction is to praise God, not Jesus, not the one who laid His

hands on her, not the one who noticed her in the first place. But she knew 'from whom all blessings flow,' namely God.

That is another thing that we see in this text. We see that Jesus notices her. She isn't looking to find Jesus; she isn't there to see if some other miracle worker is there who might be able to help her. We don't even know how she viewed her condition. It may have been something that she had gotten 'used to' over the course of the eighteen years that she was afflicted. We don't know how she got along, if she was good at recognizing voices and sandals in order to tell whom she was talking with. We don't even know if she was even looking for help with her condition. All we do know is that Jesus noticed her, intruded in her life and healed her. Not only had He healed her, but because of that healing, she was restored to her place in the community, relationships renewed that had been tested, strained and even broken. Jesus healed not only her body, but also those relationships.

What are some of the things that keep us 'bent over' - those things that keep us from seeing God's creation for what it is? Just like that woman, we are 'bent over' by many things, things that oppress us, things that keep us from looking up and realizing that we are a child of God. Sometimes, we don't even realize that we are bent over, or just chalk it up to 'that's the way life is.' Jesus has come to change all that. He came to strip away all those barriers, all those legalisms that prevent us from seeing God in our presence and seeing the work of God in our lives. Today, that legalism has restricted us to seeing God not just on Sundays, but only for one hour on Sunday. Jesus reminds us that God is always around us, God's presence is real and that God will see what we need. Jesus keeps breaking into our world, a world where we try to keep God out, where we try to restrict and control what and when God does "God things." There will always be things happening around us that, when we have our eyes and ears open, we will see that the Kingdom

of God is already here and will always be coming to us, bringing the promise of life to us, helping us to stand up straight and be all that we were created to be.

YouTube links

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/DshnbQARW6o>

Service: