

"Breaking Rules."

James 1:17-27; Ps. 45:1-2, 6-9; Mark 7:1-23

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Rules. We know how important they are. Sometimes they are put in place to protect us from danger. Sometimes they protect us from our own tendency toward excess. Sometimes they establish the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

One of the parenting classes I have taught is called "Active Parenting". It starts with the story of the "2 Peach Rule". A small town planted a very small peach orchard and in order to protect the trees, instituted a 2 peach rule: Everyone was allowed only two peaches per season.

This rule was handed down from generation to generation. The only problem was: over time, the number of peach trees kept increasing and soon the fruit was rotting because everyone was still abiding by the two peach rule.

Children complained about it, but their parents, who had grown up under the rule, insisted that it be observed. Needless to say, the rule was out of date and no longer made any sense. Maintaining it only undermined the parent's authority in their children's eyes.

The reading from Mark's Gospel is about rules, in this case, rules governing food. It must be an important issue to Mark because he spends almost an entire chapter on it, and he doesn't have a lot of scroll at his disposal: Mark's Gospel is only 16 chapters!

Just before this story, Mark's given us an account of how Jesus has been going about the countryside teaching and healing and casting out demons. Jesus has fed the 5,000, done a little walking on water, to the

great surprise of the disciples, and has continued his ministry of compassion and care for all God's children.

Things have been going well, but now the Pharisees show up. To be fair, the Pharisees were a good bunch. The Apostle Paul was a Pharisee. This group of the Jews simply wanted to integrate their faith into every aspect their daily life. Not a bad thing. To help them with this lofty goal they developed rules to cover almost every situation imaginable: Food Laws, Bathroom Laws, Bedroom Laws, Business Laws, and on and on and on.

Trying to live out our faith is not a bad thing! But the problem comes when the rules that we develop get used to thwart the rules that God lays out in his Word. The Pharisees come to Jesus with a concern that his disciples are not keeping the rituals. In this case, they are eating with defiled hands. "The Bible Clearly says we are to wash...!"

It's not that their hands were dirty. It's just that they hadn't gone through the ritual of cleansing that is essential to the Pharisee's understanding of purity and propriety and obedience to God.

They start out by asking Jesus a question. Only, it isn't a question. It's a critique. They were accusing Jesus of breaking the rules. As Tom Long suggests, it's like asking someone: "Why did you choose to play Golf on Sunday morning instead of going to church like the rest of us God-fearing Christians?"

Mark, through Jesus, then embarks on a lengthy explanation of what makes this question of food rituals so important. Mark uses this exchange between the Pharisees and Jesus to settle things, once and for all with his sidebar comment in verse 19: "Thus Jesus declared all foods clean." Case closed. End of story. Build a bridge and get over it.

But this question of food and washing rituals is merely a symptom of a larger issue. The crux of this issue is the constant battle between what is at the heart of true religion and what is laid on that foundation in the form of human institutions and regulations.

What do the commandments really command and what things are inferred from those original commandments and have become "Law"?

Jesus' position is that God's commands always trump human traditions and rules and regulations.

This is all well and good. But, this is a dangerous principle to apply. For instance, God's command is: "Thou shalt not kill." Over the centuries this "simple" command has been man-handled, twisted and manipulated in any number of ways. It is used on both sides of discussions about war and peace, abortion and capital punishment, stem cell research and euthanasia, to name but a few.

In today's text the command to "Honor thy father and mother" is lifted up as the example. Jesus points out how good, God-fearing Pharisees use the human tradition of dedicating things to God to bypass the need to care for family and loved ones.

Whenever the commandments are used to condone injustice or to support exclusion or to let us feel righteous in our prejudices, Jesus is going to have a problem with that. Whenever we give lip service to our Lord while our hearts are far from pure, far from open to really serving him, Jesus is going to have a problem with that. Whenever we hide behind ritual and rules as an excuse not to get our hands dirty and reach out to others, Jesus is going to have a problem with that.

Jesus distills all the commandments down to two: Love God and Love Neighbor. He stands on the side of the call to do justice and love kindness and walk humbly and obediently with God.

That "walk" may take us in the direction away from the beaten path, away from established "rules". It may cause us to come into conflict with other Christians who read the same Bible we do and interpret it differently. They may argue saying, "the Bible clearly says that..."

The issue may not be ritual washing of hands before eating or keeping kosher. It may have more to do with human sexuality and the ordination standards. It may have to do with our understanding of the beginning of human life or the dignity deserved by those who are nearing its end. It may have to do with health care and the distribution of resources. It may have to do with the deployment of troops and international relations.

If Jesus - his life, death and resurrection - is the center of our faith and the core of our creed, then we need to pay attention to him and also to his approach to the people around him and to the Scriptures he knew.

Jesus is anti-establishment. He just is. He is for the littlest, the lost, the overlooked, the neediest, the powerless. He breaks down the barriers that exist between us and that seek to short-circuit the call to compassion.

I like what Robert Capon has to say in his book on the history of Christianity titled, The Astonished Heart:

"To begin with, Christianity is not a religion; it's the proclamation of the end of religion. Religion is a human activity dedicated to the job of reconciling God to humanity and humanity to itself. The Gospel,

however - the Good News of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ - is the astonishing announcement that God has done the whole work of reconciliation without a scrap of human assistance. ... The church, therefore, must always be on its guard against giving the impression that its rites, ceremonies, and requirements have any religious efficacy in and of themselves. All such things are simply *sacraments* - real presences under particular signs - of the indiscriminate gift of grace that God in Christ has given everybody." (p. 2)

Capon is right. Christ came to put an end to all our heartlessness and cold Christianity. We cannot save ourselves independent of God's presence in our lives. We need to take Christ's message to heart so that we can have a heart in dealing with the problems of the world around us and of our own lives.

The way of the Spirit says that, to God, people matter most. Biblical commands never take precedence over what is compassionate and caring. We have learned this slowly - from slavery to the position of women. We are learning it slowly in other areas as well.

We need to remember how Jesus handled Scripture and interpreted it in daily life so that it becomes an instrument for health and not harm in our society. That was certainly a central issue in the ministry of Jesus and of the apostles and still is a central issue today.

Amen.