

## Love Over Law

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Healing on the sabbath. That is something that often got Jesus in trouble with the Pharisees, or the Sadducees, all of the religious leaders, all of the people concerned with law. They held on to this idea of, 'God gave us this law. God sent it down. This is what the ten commandments say. These other laws that come from the ten commandments, that's what we need to follow. That's how we find redemption. It's the sacrifices. It's the being obedient. It's all of this. It's following the code.'

But what about those who the code leaves out? What about those who are not "whole" people or "clean" people? When someone's body doesn't work as it should due to disease, or maybe as a result of defect, or because of injury someone is missing a part of their body, a limb, or a digit... What about these people? Does God not love these people? Well, they're not whole or clean, so they can't enter the temple of God, says the law. Only they who are whole and clean can come before God.

So this woman who comes in to the synagogue and is just wanting to go before God is not considered a whole and clean human. She's been bent over for 18 years either as a result of a crippling defect or a disease that has made her weak, and she just wants to go before her God. Yet, the law says no. She just wants to hear the scripture, to hear the message. Yet, the law holds her back. Perhaps she's heard Jesus is there and is hoping for a miracle. But on the sabbath day, the law stands firm against such hope.

Jesus however, embodies the law. More accurately, Jesus embodies what the law is suppose to be. And the law is supposed to be love. That's what's missing in the religious leaders' interpretation of the law. It becomes about legality and not about redemption.

There are hundreds of thousands of people in our world today who are held back by legality and bureaucracy. They are held back by what the system says needs to happen rather than by what love says needs to happen. If you go out in Portland there are people losing their homes. They may be working two or three jobs to try and make ends meet. Single moms with children they need to feed, but they need to provide them with a home as well. And these people are losing their homes because of systems of oppression, bureaucracy, and legality.

What would Jesus say today? If he came and he saw that going on, what would Jesus say? We have a pretty good idea what Jesus would say. He would go to those who have the power to change it and say, 'You hypocrites! You can change so much, and yet you keep yourselves tied back.'

That's what the religious leader in the gospel reading was doing. He knew this code and had a particular way of understanding the law. The people in power, they knew the law, they knew what the scripture said. But there was the status quo. There was a culture of blessings and curses. She's diseased. She's cursed. He's rich. He's blessed. But we know that's not the way it works, right?

Jesus sees this woman. He watches her come in and says, “Woman, come to me. You are set free from your infirmity.” Then he lays his hand upon her; a symbolic action of conveying a blessing onto another person. Immediately, she stands up straight and praises God.

Wouldn't you do the same thing? Think about it. For 18 years you're bent over. You can't help it. It's simply how your body works. You need to walk with canes so as not to topple forward because of the constant imbalance. Those of us gathered around today can stand up straight whenever we want, but if we stay in a bent over position for very long our backs get tired. If we stay bent over for an hour, we may not want to stand up straight because we know how much our backs are gonna hurt when we do straighten ourselves. If we stay bent over for hours on end can you imagine how painful that will be?

When Jesus comes in and heals the woman, of course she's going to praise God. Do you know how much more comfortable she is? What pain she had is gone! She's healed, she can stand up straight, she doesn't need those canes anymore. So, yes, she's praising God.

If that happened here. If someone we knew had a skeletal issue, had been bent over like that for nearly two decades, and they were suddenly healed, what would we be doing? How would we respond as witnesses to such a miracle? We would praise God. We would react in astonishment and wonder. We would share in the joy of our friend being physically made new. And we would give thanks to God for the miracle.

When this woman in the Gospel reading was healed, however, the Pharisee's response was tied up in legality. He was caught up in the law that proclaimed the sabbath day a rest day. No work was to be done. His response was to chastise the crowd saying, “There are six days for work. Come and be healed on those days, not on the sabbath.”

Really? You just witness a true God-inspired, God-blessed, God-given miracle of redemption and new life and healing! Your response is, “Go away! Don't come and be healed on the sabbath day.”?

Why was this important for the Pharisee? In the Jewish tradition, the sabbath day is a day for rest. It is to honor and remember how God made the world in six days and on the seventh God rested. Therefore, you don't work. Healing is considered work. But God is the one who set the day of rest. God has the authority to decide what can be done on the day of rest.

Let's look at it this way. This woman's entire life is work. It is work for her to get up. It is work for her to get from place to place. It is work for her to do anything that she has to do because of her disability. No matter what she is doing, she doesn't have a choice but to work, because the way her body is formed does not allow for rest. But on this sabbath day, Jesus gave her rest. On this sabbath day, a holy day of rest, she finally had peace in her body.

Much more beyond that, when Jesus responded to the Pharisee, he pointed out each of the religious leaders, on the sabbath day, unties their ox or donkey and leads it to water. It's common sense this work needs to happen even on the sabbath. If you have livestock or a beast of burden in your care you need to take them for water. Otherwise they die of dehydration. These days the law considers it animal cruelty to not provide such a basic life necessity, and you can be fined or

imprisoned. If the religious leaders can take their animals for water on the sabbath, how much more willing do you think God is to set the law aside and heal this “daughter of Abraham” on the sabbath.

Jesus uses those words, “daughter of Abraham.” We’ve heard of sons of Abraham, and children of Abraham. Jesus is calling this woman out as a *daughter* of Abraham. In a culture of blessings and curses, with her ailment, she would have constantly been in shame. In three words Jesus is saying she belongs. She is one of us. In three words Jesus gave this woman her dignity back.

Why are the Pharisee and the religious leaders fighting against the healing? Why are they fighting against the love of their God being shown in powerful ways? Perhaps we can get an answer from the reading from Hebrews.

The passage we read from Hebrews compares what was old to what is new. The first section from the passage talks about the old covenant, the covenant given to the people at Mt. Sinai. If we go back to the book of Exodus, chapter 19, Paul is referring to this point in time, right after God has shown all of God’s wonder and power with ten plagues set against Egypt, and the parting of the Red Sea to give safe passage to God’s people while Egypt’s army was flooded out.

The people, fresh from this miraculous deliverance out of slavery, make their way to the mountain of God to receive the commandments. If you remember your scripture, God gave them a whole ritual they needed to do in order to prepare to receive God’s law. Part of that ritual was marking off the mountain. Nothing living could touch it. Not even a small animal. The people had to stay away and ritually cleanse themselves for two days so they could present themselves as holy and clean before God.

When the day came, and the people were ready to come before God and receive the holy word of God, the people were filled with anticipation. They were expectant for everything good God would give them. This was the day they were going to hear the voice of God. On that day God descended on the mountain in a storm with thunder and tempest winds. When God spoke God’s voice had so much power it hurt their ears. The people shrank back, saying, “No, no, if God keeps talking it’s going to kill us.” According to the epistle, even Moses said he was terrified.

The people then came to Moses and told him, ‘Moses, you go. We know you can speak to God without fear of death. Go, speak to God, and bring his law back to us.’ So Moses went and he was on the mountain with God for forty days and forty nights. At the end of that time Moses came down with the ten commandments inscribed on two tablets of stone.

It was the terror in this moment of first meeting God and being communally traumatized by the power of God’s voice that set a culture of fear. That was a fear that told the people not to cross the law. This led to a culture of distance and separation from God.

Think about it. In the wilderness they had the tabernacle. Only priests could go into the inner courts, and only Moses could go into the Holy of Holies, that place where God sat enthroned above the ten commandments atop the Ark of the Covenant. Moses had a veil over his face to prevent the glory of the Lord reflected in his face from shining out, except when he needed to show the people what he was saying was from God. No one else had such a relationship with God where

they could speak with God face to face. While God loved Israel and wanted to ensure their place as God's people. God was at a distance.

For this woman in the Gospel; for so many in our world today, God is at a distance. God is held apart from us by fear. It can be a fear of those who are more powerful. It can be fear of what awaits on the other side. It can be fear of not really understanding God.

When Jesus came though, God was with us. God in flesh was with us, was here among us. That doesn't sound like a god we ought to fear. At least it doesn't sound like it in a way that we should tremble and want to stay away. Fear in awe, yes. But not fear in threat. When Jesus came there was no longer distance and fear and separation. The Gospels even tell us when Jesus died on the cross there was an earthquake and thunder and the curtain to the Holy or Holies tore. The curtain that separated God from God's people could not hold God back anymore. God is no longer far away.

The prophets tell us God said, "...I will make a new covenant with the people... It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people... they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Paul tells us Jesus lives within us. Jesus even prayed in the Gospel according to John, "My prayer is not for [the disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20-21). Jesus is saying that he will live in us and we will live in Christ. There is no longer separation from God. There is no longer fear of God. That is the Good News. We are free to move past legality. We are free to move beyond the status quo.

But humans are creatures of habit. One of my professors in seminary once told us often times human beings don't look for things to get better. What human beings look for is homeostasis. They look for things to stay the same. Yes, we say we want things to get better. Yes, we say we want to be healthier. Yes, we make New Year's resolutions and say, let's change things. But we really just want things to stay where we're comfortable.

As an example, what would you do if I stood up here and said this? "I'm gonna change everything in this church. We're gonna redo the walls. We're gonna redo the sanctuary. We're gonna bring in a rock 'n' roll praise band. We're gonna put in a whole massive theater system in place of the cross. We're gonna change it all!" If I did that, what are you gonna tell me?

You'd tell me, "It was great knowing you, Pastor Tom. Thank you for the great lessons over these past couple months. We hope you do wonderful things in your next church. But this isn't a good match anymore. Goodbye." Why? Because as human beings, often times even if change is better for us in the long run, we don't want to change. We want to stay the same because that's what we know. We know what we like... no we don't. We know what we know.

This is what we know. And change is scary. Transformation is scary. It takes us into the unknown. But that's what God calls us to. God calls us to transform. God calls us to step out. One

of the reasons Jesus was such a threat to the religious leaders was because he challenged homeostasis. He challenged the status quo. He challenged the expectations of society. He said that's not good enough anymore. God says you can do better. God says you are better. God says let's change it together so that everyone is blessed. Not just those people who are whole. Not just those people who know the law. Not just those people who are rich and have lots of livestock and can trade and own everything. Let's change the world so that everyone is blessed; so the vision in Revelation, where even those who have so little still have so much, comes to reality. That's what God in Jesus is saying. That's why Jesus is saying, 'You hypocrite. You have so much. You can do so much. Yet you don't.'

When I was working at Arata Creek School I was working with kids who have emotional and behavioral disorders who cannot function in a general education setting. They come in and they are challenged learners, not by any fault of their own, but simply because of the way their brain works or because of the high anxiety situations they are living in on a daily basis. It is hard working with these kids. One of the things they did at Arata Creek was constantly train us on how to better be in relationship with our students. Because if you want any student who is challenged to succeed, any student at all for that matter, you build relationship.

One of the videos they showed us in training was by an educator named Rita Pierson. I love this video. It's on 'Ted Talks'. You can look it up. What she was talking about was the relationships that she had with her students, and how she used that to help them succeed. One of the examples she gave was of the year she was assigned a class so academically deficient she started to cry. She had no idea how, in nine months, she was going to get them from where they were to where they needed to be.

But she was dedicated to her students and her passion for teaching. First thing she told them was, "I am the best teacher and you are the best students. They put us all in here together to show the rest of the school how it's done." Then she gave them a mantra to repeat daily. "I am somebody. I was somebody when I came. I'll be a better somebody when I leave. I am powerful and I am strong. I deserve the education I get here. I have things to do, people to impress, and places to go." They repeated that daily. The thing is, if you repeat something to yourself enough, it becomes part of you.

Rita had the example of her mother to follow as an educator. Her mother was the type of teacher who went beyond what was expected of her. She did reviews with the kids on her personal time. She would make home visits in the afternoon. She had food for the kids who didn't get enough to eat, washcloths and soap for those kids who couldn't bathe regularly. She loved them as her own. And when she passed, the number of students who showed up at her funeral, thankful for how she cared and pushed and nurtured them, was overwhelming.

Jesus is calling us to that kind of love. It's the kind of love that breaks expectation. It's the kind of love that changes culture, goes beyond legality and bureaucracy. It's the kind of love that says thoughts and prayers alone aren't good enough. It's the kind of love that demands action.

This is the love we are called to. It's the love we are called to show. It's the love we are called to pray to be filled with. It's the love that challenges the status quo, brings dignity back to

humankind; women, men, children, outcasts, homeless, sick, thirsty, imprisoned. The love that restores is the love we are called to give.

Jesus is right there showing us how to love in this way. Jesus is right there filling us, sending the Holy Spirit, giving us wisdom and insight, giving us power to transform the world. Because God is no longer separate. God's voice no longer causes us pain. God's voice comes through Jesus, who lives within us, changing us, renewing us, making us whole and making us part of the family of God.

May we be worthy of such love. May we listen for such insight. May we be open to such change and transformation. In Jesus name, Amen.