

Grace Episcopal Church  
11th Sunday after Pentecost  
Rev. Brian C Justice

Isaiah 58.9-14  
Psalm 103.1-8  
Hebrews 12.18-29  
Luke 13.10-17

Which One Are You?

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O God  
You gave us the rules to set us free.  
Jesus shows us the Way.  
May we follow him.  
Amen.

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Once upon a time, two monks were traveling through the land and came to a river where they met a lovely girl. Afraid of the river's dangerous current, she asked if they could carry her across to the other side. One of the monks hesitated, but the other one helped: he picked her up on his shoulders, transported her across the water, and put her down safely on the other side. She thanked him and she departed.

As the two monks continued on their way, the one was brooding and angry. Unable to hold his silence, he finally spoke out.

"Brother, our monastic rule teaches us to renounce temptation and desire and so to avoid any contact with women, but you picked up that girl on your shoulders and carried her right across the river!"

"Brother," the second monk replied, "I set her down by the river a while ago. Why are you still carrying her?"

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The rules. The commandments. The laws. The Torah itself ...

Why?

What's the point?

When we hear about rules, regulations, expectations, ethical imperatives, codes of conduct, commandments, the law ... we might recoil ... and draw back, deep into ourselves before the disgusting ghost of *discipline*.

Because the idea of *discipline* has such negative connotations.

Right?

Like a child who requires discipline. Or an employee or a public official who is disciplined for unlawful, illegitimate conduct.

But the word *discipline* means “learning” and is related to the word *disciple*, “learner.” Therefore, a disciple is one who seeks discipline, a learner who seeks learning. Related to both discipline and disciple, in Latin, is *discern*. To discern means to learn by distinguishing one thing from another.

In today’s Gospel text, Luke narrates a scene that is set, significantly, in the synagogue, which was literally a “house of learning” or, we could say, a house of discipline, a house of discernment.

Faithful Jews, then and now, go to the synagogue to learn the Torah ... to hear the teaching of the Law of Moses ... to distinguish the true and the good and the beautiful from the false and the evil and the blemished ... to be disciples of God and follow the rules.

But when the people went to the synagogue on that particular Sabbath and encounter Jesus of Nazareth, they got a little more than they were bargaining for!

In the synagogue that day was a woman who for 18 years had suffered “with a spirit that had crippled her.” She neither said nor did anything in the synagogue, she was just there, “bent over.” ... “When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, ‘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’ was outraged ... because Jesus had broken the rules ... at least he had broken the lifeless, literal, and *incorrect* interpretation of the rules. The Torah commanded that no work should be done on the Sabbath. And so the leader scolds Jesus and the woman before the people, saying, “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 Jesus the Wild Lion roars, “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?”

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The people came to the synagogue *to learn* the Law of Moses, the Torah, the commandments, the rules that God has given. On that day, Jesus did more than explain the Law, he exemplified the Law. He didn’t tell them; he showed them.

With the healing of the woman on the sabbath, Jesus reveals the answer to our question about rules. *This* is why we have rules ... not to lock us up; but to let us go.

The Law, the commandments, the rules... it’s there *to liberate us* ... to set us free ... to set us free *from ourselves* ... from the shadow of ourselves ... the shallow, smug, scared, stuck-inside-our-own-stuff selves that would ... hesitate ... recoil ... draw back ... and read the Law as the dead letter rather than as the Living Spirit ...

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When you think about the rules, you cannot forget who you are.

And the Prophet Isaiah, in chapter 58, tells you exactly who you are ... you are a watered garden whose waters never fail; you are the city on the hill whose old ruins have been rebuilt; you ... YOU ... are the repairer of the breach. You have the rules and you know what to do. Because you are a disciple, a learner of the Living Spirit that blows like a trumpet and burns like a fire.

The rules are given by God with grace and mercy and love to encourage you and empower you to do what you have to do, to be who you are called to be.

But wait ...

There is a girl at the river’s edge asking for help and there are two people standing right beside her ... one of them hesitates *because of the rules* and one of them helps *because of the rules* ... which one are you?

Amen.