

Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd
Pentecost 11
August 25, 2019

The Power of “Thou Shalt” **Luke 13:10-17**

The old-timers among us will remember the television personality Art Linkletter. His interviews with children on his TV show *House Party, Kids say the Darndest Things* put surprising twists into, well, just about everything. Here’s an interview he conducted with a child on the subject of biblical nonviolence:

Art: What are you learning at school that you can tell us about?

Child: They teach you not to fight with your friends.

Art: How do they do that?

Child: They read from the Bible, where Jesus says, “Thou shalt not kill.”

Art: I’m happy to hear that they’ve stopped the killing on the playgrounds this way. But tell me, have you been punished lately?

Child: Yes.

Art: What for?

Child: Hitting a kid in the face with a cupcake.

Art: Why did you do that?

Child: It’s not in the Bible.

There are two time-honored ways of looking at the scriptures that go all the way back to the time of Jesus. There were two schools of thought in those days:

One represented by the great Rabbi Shammai, and another by his arch-rival, Rabbi Hillel. The divisions between them persist in Jewish thought to this day. They even persist in Christianity, if you dig deep enough.

Regarding the Mosaic Law, Shammai taught, “If it’s not in the Law, it is not permitted.” Hillel, on the other hand, had a more moderate view. He said, “If it’s not prohibited in the Law, it *is* permitted.”

The kid who wanted a free pass on cupcake-throwing is a latter-day true believer of the school of Hillel. Cupcake-throwing is not directly addressed in the Bible, so he figures he’s home free.

That’s not true to what Hillel would actually say, of course. An admirer of Hillel would point out that there are some things the Bible does tell us to do, like treating one another with kindness. Smearing your classmate’s face with cupcake icing is not exactly a kind thing to do. So, for Shammai and Hillel fans alike, the scriptures are clear: Eat your cupcake instead of throwing it. Or, better yet, offer some of it to your classmate to enjoy!

When many Christians think of religious law, the shadow of Shammai looms larger than that of Hillel, whether we’ve ever heard of those two men or not. One of the first things that comes to mind is the Ten Commandments. Most of those great statements of God’s Law are worded negatively:

“Thou shalt not ...” That’s led some of us to look at God’s Law as primarily negative, to see it as a restraining device — a theological leash that pulls us back to the straight and narrow anytime we deviate from it.

No doubt that’s an important function of the Law: to restrain. But it’s not the only reason God gives us laws to follow in life. Sometimes the Law’s influence on us is positive. Sometimes it leads us to go places and do things we would not otherwise be inclined to go to or do.

This very debate — between the restraining and empowering functions of the Law — is present in today’s gospel lesson. Jesus has performed a healing on the sabbath. And his rivals, the religious authorities, are not amused.

Let’s take a few steps back and examine the story. There’s a woman with a horrible disability: a woman who is “bent over double.” She’s been that way for 18 long years. Imagine what life has been like for her. She’s spent her days not looking out at the world around her, but rather staring down at her own feet. What a grim perspective!

This encounter takes place in a synagogue: a worship space that was strictly segregated by gender. On one side sit the men. They are free to dialogue with the rabbi about the finer points of the law. On the other side sit the women. They are expected to listen in silence.

There’s no indication the bent-over woman is doing anything to attract attention to herself.

On the contrary, the regular worshipers in that synagogue have probably grown quite used to the sad sight of her by now. They hardly notice her.

“What could she possibly have done,” some wonder every once in a while, “to rate such a terrible punishment from the Almighty?” (It was a common error — both then and now — to see illness as God’s punishment; it’s not.)

The woman is not asking for help or healing. She’s just going to worship in her own quiet way, lurching into the meeting-house with her distinctive, shuffling step. Few notice her. Except for Jesus. Jesus notices her. And he resolves to do something to help her.

Notice that the text says, “He called her over and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’” *He called her over.* The healing is not her idea. It’s his.

Jesus isn’t just sitting in the synagogue among the other worshipers. Verse 10 says, “Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.” Jesus actually interrupts his sermon to minister individually to this poor, bent over woman, who doesn’t even seem to have asked for his help!

For that moment, at least, Jesus is living out his famous parable about the shepherd and the lost sheep. The shepherd in the parable leaves the 99 behind to go out looking for the lost creature. This is what Jesus is doing in the synagogue: He could have waited until everything was said and done and then approached the woman. She’s been disabled for 18 years; surely she could have waited a few minutes longer!

But Jesus can't wait. To him, this woman's healing is an urgent matter. He interrupts his teaching to deliver the joyous news: "You are set free!" Then he steps over and lays hands on her. In an instant, she is standing upright, regarding the world around her in a whole new way. What a wonder! What a marvel! Surely there are tears of joy on many cheeks as the congregation witnesses this miracle.

But at least one face in the crowd remains dry. There are no tears on the face of the leader of the synagogue. Far from being filled with joy, the man is irate. "But it's the sabbath day!" he objects. "Six days of the week, you can perform this work. Why do you have to do it on the sabbath, when faithful believers like us are prohibited from doing any work at all?"

Clearly, his approach to the law is all about "Thou shalt not." He simply can't grasp the power of "Thou shalt."

In his book *What's So Amazing about Grace?* Philip Yancey has this to say: "The opposite of sin is grace, not virtue Legalism fails miserably at the one thing it is supposed to do: encourage obedience." The leader of the synagogue is a legalist. He's all about virtue. For him, the greatest virtue is keeping the sabbath, fulfilling every stricture of the law.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with the synagogue leader's approach. Keeping the commandments, Jesus would affirm, is a good thing, a faithful thing. But it's not enough.

For our Lord, there's something else that's more important than virtue, as it's conventionally understood, and that's reaching out to others in the name of God to bring about graceful transformation. In our gospel reading, it's likely there is no one present in the congregation who is more desperate for transformation than this woman. But she hasn't come to the synagogue specifically looking for healing.

She may not even feel she deserves healing, buying the line so many have fed her over the years that her bent-over posture is God's punishment for sin. But her heart is weary, all the same. She yearns to look up and live.

Because Jesus is all about grace, she receives at the hand of Jesus a marvelous, free gift: an upright posture. Because of that gift, she now has a chance at a normal life. To Jesus, administering such a life-changing gift is well worth interrupting his synagogue teaching.

It may well be that his act of healing is itself the greatest lesson he's offering this day. Francis of Assisi is famed for having taught his spiritual brothers and sisters, "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words." Nothing proclaims the word "grace" more emphatically than the sight of this woman's spine straightening out, seemingly of its own accord, as she stands upright for the first time in 18 years. Beside the wonder of this mighty sign, the little detail that it happened on the sabbath fades into insignificance.

Does anyone remember what Jesus was teaching in the synagogue that day — what his scripture text was, or where he was going with his interpretation? We have no idea, because Luke didn't think it important enough to record. It was not Jesus' words from the pulpit that day that caused such agitation in the synagogue leader. The words are forgotten. It was *his deed*: his grace-filled action that restored this woman to a normal life!

The gift came to her freely, beyond her deserving. It was grace — pure grace. Followers of Jesus have celebrated it ever since.