

## Breaking the Rules

Jesus was a rule breaker! Just a few Sundays ago in worship we heard a story about Jesus breaking some pretty important religious rules...and doing so on purpose. (Mark 2:23-3:6)

In this passage from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus breaks traditional rules about the sabbath, not once but twice. In the first instance Jesus and his disciples don't seem to be purposefully provocative, just hungry when they harvest grain to eat on their way to the synagogue on the Sabbath. However, the second instance seems to be much more intentional as Jesus heals a man right in the middle of the synagogue and once again on the Sabbath. The first was just a bit of rule bending, the second was outright defiance, but in both cases, the intention was the same. Jesus broke the Sabbath rules to help others, to enact justice, and to make a spiritual point about the Sabbath that he believed his critics had missed. And, the result was also the same...he made the leaders of his own religion very mad.

Shortly after I was studying this scripture to prepare my homily, I happened across an article about the fiftieth anniversary of the ordination of the first eleven women as priests in the Episcopal Church. It was an ordination that was not approved by the church because at that time cannon law stated that priests had to be men. So, fifty years ago three male bishops and eleven women intentionally broke tradition and their religious vows and joined Jesus as breakers of the rules. The result was that they made the people and the leaders of their own denomination mad. The church nearly split, congregations left the denomination, local priests who supported their new female colleagues were brought up on ecclesiastical charges and lost their positions, and the eleven women were shunned and threatened. At first the Episcopalians who thought women should be priests worked within the system, but when that effort didn't seem to bring about any meaningful change they broke the rules and made the church face the injustice of its own policies.

My next task was to prepare a homily on the grief we experience when a loved one dies. While doing this news from public radio came to me about the death of a man I had come to know through my friend and mentor, Reverend Don Welch. You see, Don and James (Jim) Lawson both aspired to be Methodist missionaries to the people of India. Jim was selected and Don was not...a decision that led to the parish ministry and later to academics and to Wofford College as Dean of Students and Professor of Religion where as a freshman I met Professor Welch for the first time. Jim Lawson did enter the mission field and had the opportunity to study under Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi's teachings led Jim to return to the United States and enter the Civil Rights Movement as the right hand man to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was Jim Lawson who taught the principals of non-violent resistance to Dr. King and who was the visionary who organized sit-ins and strikes and marches across the South to bring an awareness of the injustices brought upon African-Americans in the United States. Jim Lawson was a rule-breaker and his idea of non-violent resistance was questioned by many African-Americans and made the white majority so mad that they responded with police dogs, water cannons, and lynchings.

Seems like every time I turn on the news there is word of another powerful figure breaking the rules...a church leader is accused of sexual abuse, a government official is accused of corruption, a politician is accused of campaign finance and other irregularities, and a C.E.O. is accused of cutting safety measures to increase profits. And, each one of these incidents is met with anger and a call for accountability. So, the question becomes, when do we celebrate rule-breakers and when are they to be held accountable?

I believe that the primary test for rule-breaking and rule-breakers is, for whom is the rule being broken? Is it for yourself, your own purposes, your power or status? Or, is the rule being broken to serve those in need, to right a wrong, to stop oppression, to question injustice, to transform what has become rote and rigid and obsolete in its application, or to proclaim a greater truth about fairness, equity, freedom, and love. Or, in Jesus

