

Reflection – Pastor Seng Eng Low

21st Aug 2022 – Pentecost 11

Are you someone who keeps all the rules or are you a rule breaker?

This is an important question. As Christians, what do you think is expected of us when it comes to obeying the rules? Are we expected to observe all the rules and regulations? Is this what it means to be a good Christian?

Let's turn to today's Bible reading and see what it has to tell us about following the rules: Jesus was teaching in the synagogue. It was a Sabbath. What do you know about the Jews and Sabbath? The Jews had very strict rules about what they could do and what they couldn't do on a Sabbath. This goes all the way back to when Moses received the ten commandments. The relevant one is the third commandment.

From the Book of Exodus: 'Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹ Six days you shall labour and do all your work. ¹⁰ But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹ For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.'

What are Jews supposed to do on the Sabbath? They were supposed to rest. They could work on any of the other days of the week but not on the Sabbath. To this day, many Orthodox Jews still observe the sabbath very strictly. For example, they refuse to drive their cars on the Sabbath. They do not cook and only eat food that has been prepared on the previous day. All this so as not to break the Sabbath.

Back to our reading. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, and it was a Sabbath. Just then a crippled woman appears, who was bent over and couldn't stand up straight. It was said that a spirit had crippled her, and for 18 she had been bent over, unable to stand up normally. Can you imagine what it would have been like for her? All the ordinary everyday things we do would have been so much harder, if not impossible for her. It does not say if she was in pain, but I am guessing that if you are bent double all day, you would have been suffering quite a bit pain.

Anyway, this poor woman enters the synagogue, and Jesus noticed her. He called her over and laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was set

free from the spirit. She stood up straight and began to praise God. A miracle! How wonderful!

This is where it gets interesting, because the leader of the synagogue became indignant. Why? Because Jesus had healed her *on the Sabbath*. Jesus had broken the rule about not doing any work on the Sabbath. The leader of the synagogue says: There are six other days of the week when Jesus could have cured her, how dare he break the rule about working on the Sabbath!

Jesus broke the rules. Does this mean we also can break the rules? Can we break any rule we like anytime we want? Why did Jesus break this rule? He broke the rule because something was more important than keeping the rule. The woman had suffered for 18 years already and Jesus was not willing to wait even one more day to free her from suffering. He had to set her free immediately, even though it was a sabbath. Even if it meant he was breaking an important rule.

I find that this is very helpful for me. I think that most of us are pretty law abiding, we tend to observe the rules, don't we? But this example of Jesus, shows us that there are times when it is justified to break the rules. To free people from suffering. We don't just blindly obey the rules but we must think about whether it is a good rule in the first place.

I want you to think for a minute: Who makes the rules? Who gets to say what the rules should be? We began today with an acknowledgement of the traditional custodians of this land, the Kuringai and Terramerragal peoples. Since time immemorial, they had the care of this land. And yet all this changed when European settlers came. After countless generations of Indigenous custodianship, there were now new rules governing these lands. Who makes the rules? Who gets to make the rules? How come they get to make the rules?

Australia today is a democracy, where our elected representatives make the law (the rules) through the parliamentary process. I think most of us would say that this system of rulemaking is better than say, the one in Russia, where one man seems to be able to make all the rules for the whole country. And yet within our system, there are still interesting situations, where the rules seem to be less than democratic.

Did any of you watch '4 Corners' a couple of weeks ago? The programme featured some of the new female Independents elected to the Federal government. The programme showed how these women were excited to be moving into their new offices in Canberra and getting ready to make their maiden speeches in Parliament. But even before the first sitting, they received the news that PM Albanese had cut their staffing allocation to just 1 advisor. (Under the previous government, Independents were each allocated 4 advisors to help with their work) The new Independents were in despair. How could they function effectively in Parliament when they did not have the support staff? The PM justified the cuts as a cost saving, but others suggest that it is a way of undermining power of the Independents. Who makes the rules? Who gets to make the rules?

So even as we try to live as good people, as responsible citizens, this doesn't mean that we just blindly accept all the rules, blindly follow rules. We are given brains to think with and the Holy Spirit to guide us to all truth and we can follow the example of Jesus, who sometimes broke the rules, who valued justice and compassion more than just blindly obeying the rules.

Let's go back to the woman who was bent over. I wonder if you noticed that she was said to have been crippled by 'a spirit'. It seems that it was not exactly a medical condition that had dragged her down, but something else. What sorts of things, besides physical ailments, can drag us down?

I'd like to give you a personal example: When I was growing up, my mother was very critical of me. She never praised me and nothing I ever did was good enough. She often said I was useless. (This was partly a cultural thing, as Chinese did not believe in praising their children in case it made them big-headed.) My mother, I would say, was harsher, than most. To her, I could never do anything right.

This had a profound effect on me, so much so that when I became an adult, I was afraid of making mistakes, of being a failure. I had a particular fear of public speaking, of making a fool of myself in public. Nowadays, most of the time I am able to keep such negative thoughts at bay. But a couple of Sundays ago I had a sort of panic attack, the old fear getting to me.

You see, I was to read the Bible reading. This was at my new church, Willoughby Uniting. Colin and I have moved to that church not long ago and it was the first time I was doing the Bible reading. As I sat in the

congregation waiting for my turn to go up, I could feel myself getting worked up. My heart was beating loudly, I started to sweat and my legs were trembling. What if I made a mistake? What if I stumbled? I had to take several deep breaths and tell myself that I knew where that panic was coming from. It was the voice from the past telling me I wasn't good enough, that I was going to make a fool of myself. So, I pulled myself together and did get through the reading, and after the service quite a few people came up to tell me that it was excellent, even as I still felt the adrenalin coursing through my system from the effort, even as I still felt shaky.

This is what I mean about the kind of thing that can drag us down. For most of my life, I have avoided any kind of public speaking or performances, out of a fear of making a fool of myself. It has taken many years (including going for counselling) to get myself to the point where I am more able to do public speaking comfortably. And every now and then, I still get relapses, like at church that Sunday. This is the sort of thing that can cripple us, can bend us low and drag us down.

What does Jesus say about the things that drag us down? The things that bend us over so that we are looking at the dirt, instead of standing upright? Jesus wants to heal us of those things, whatever they are. Immediately. Even at the cost of breaking the Sabbath.

So are there things that drag *you* down? It may be something from the past, something that was done to you or said to you, that makes you feel small or inadequate. It may be that you can't forgive someone, it may be a long-running resentment, that makes you burn every time you think about it. It may be that you can't forgive *yourself* for something in your past. It may be a sense of guilt or a sense of shame. All these things drag you down and stop you from living in freedom. Maybe you have been carrying your burden for 18 years, maybe even longer. Well, today's reading tells us what Jesus says: Jesus wants to set you free. Immediately. In John 8:36, it says: 'If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.'

So, today, if you have anything like that in your life, dragging you down, bending you over, I want you to imagine Jesus laying his hands gently on you and lifting you up so that, instead of staring at the ground, you can stand tall and look into the face of Jesus. Look into his eyes and see his love for you. If Jesus were here today, he would say to you: 'You are set free'. May we hear his words and receive healing. Amen