

August 21, 2016
Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 16, Year C, RCL
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Jeremiah 1:4-10
Psalms 71:1-6
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:10-17

For all my life, I have been more of a rule-follower than a rule-breaker. Overall, as I see it, rules are helpful. Some provide order while others keep things fair. Some rules help keep us safe. For example, we all learn this one as very small children: Look both ways before you cross the street. We live by this rule, both literally and metaphorically. By the time we are adults, we have lived by it for so long that our compliance occurs automatically, without conscious thought. We even develop a sort of autopilot, based on our environment, that helps us to comply efficiently. This keeps us safe, but only until conditions change, and then our reliance on autopilot is a liability.

I was unaware that I had a street-crossing autopilot until I traveled to Japan. Japan was the first place I visited in which traffic flows in the opposite direction than it does here in the U.S. It was also the first place I visited with a large number of bicycles on the roads. My street-crossing habit became apparent to me only after I was nearly run over by a bicycle in a crosswalk. I realized then that my habit was to look left, for traffic in the nearer lane, and to listen for cars. If all was clear, I would take a step into the intersection while turning to look right. That day in Japan, I looked left, heard and saw it was clear, and began to step out. As momentum was carrying me into the intersection, I looked right, to discover a bicyclist hurtling toward me, going in the correct, but to me unexpected, direction. It scared me, because I very nearly injured us both.

In today's reading from Luke, Jesus heals a woman who has been disabled for eighteen long years. Typically for the Gospels, it's a story about Jesus publicly demonstrating his power to heal, while also being a story about something else. In this case, the "something else" comes from this twist: Jesus heals this woman on the Sabbath, at the synagogue.

Based on our past experience with the Gospels, even as the story shapes up, we can imagine what will happen. As the leader of that synagogue sees it, Jesus' healing act is work, and work is forbidden on the Sabbath. As Jesus sees it, his healing belongs in the category of work justified on the Sabbath. The people end up agreeing with Jesus.

We have heard similar Gospel stories many times before. There are no surprises in this one—we anticipate how it will end. But the experience of hearing this story would be very different for people hearing it for the first time. The challenge for us is to imagine that we are looking left, and Jesus is the unexpected bicyclist barreling down on us from the right.

I don't know if we can ever get there, but it might help to imagine the life of the leader of the synagogue. He very likely has good reasons to be wary. For example, there is "Sabbath creep." People are always asking him about exceptions to the expectations for the Sabbath. He tries to work it out so that everyone is happy, but he's getting tired of it. His job is demanding and time consuming. He's constantly caught between the traditionalists and the progressives, each group with their very different expectations. One group has even talked about breaking off to start their own synagogue, one that will include only like-minded people. So far he has managed to keep everybody together, and now Jesus has come along. Sure, the synagogue leader thinks to himself, everyone is happy with Jesus now, but just wait: eventually he will do something really far out, and the crowd will turn on him in a second.

For the leader of the synagogue, the rules are something he can rely on to keep him out of trouble. More than that, maybe he sincerely wants to do the right thing, and he believes the rules help him do it. He probably doesn't even realize it: the rules have become ingrained into a set of habits and expectations, and he doesn't even think about them anymore. With this rule-cultivated autopilot, he doesn't recognize a good thing when he sees it. Perhaps even worse, he doesn't know a good thing until it's gone. The rule-cultivated autopilot that often helps him, in this case fails him.

Being a rule-follower, I am completely sympathetic to his situation. Jesus probably is too, and is trying to help him do the right thing. Maybe Jesus is letting him—and me and you—off the hook. Then again, maybe Jesus is putting him—and me and you—on a brand *new* hook. Jesus seems to be saying that the rules need to be continuously reexamined and their intent reinterpreted. To do that, we have to turn off the autopilot.

My first inclination was to speak today about the Sabbath and how little attention we seem to be able to give it. Of the Ten Commandments, the one we most ignore may be the third: "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy." Most of us don't keep the Sabbath nearly enough, and here we are hearing a story telling us to go ahead and break it.

Our Sunday worship takes place in the midst of the Sabbath. Nonetheless, many of us, myself included, will leave this sanctuary to go accomplish some very non-Sabbath things. The other day, I was flipping through the instruction manual of our new stove, looking for the solution to a heating problem. In the process, I passed by a section called "Sabbath Mode," which, by enabling, "you will make the oven conform to Star-K Jewish Sabbath requirements." To my surprise, I found myself feeling just a little jealous of our Jewish brothers and sisters. I found myself wishing that someone gave me stricter rules for the Sabbath, and that I felt compelled to comply with them.

If you read churchy articles, there have been a lot recently about the importance of taking Sabbath. Clergy are getting more insistent about not scheduling church meetings or other commitments on their day off. But if we are successful at that, then we often fill the day with non-church tasks. It is a rat race with which you are familiar. We live in a demanding culture. We live complex lives. Most of us are fortunate enough to be able to take vacation time. Maybe we see those vacation days as something like a string of Sabbath days. We try to preserve the rest we get, like storing iced tea in the refrigerator. But it doesn't really work that way, especially when all the iced tea we make on vacation gets consumed, just slaking the thirst that has accumulated since the last vacation.

Sabbath is really something else, anyway. I say this to myself as well as to you. Sabbath is about sitting with God. Jesus would remind us that it's not about running around enforcing the old rules. Instead, it's about listening to what God is saying right now. This is as important today as it has ever been. Maybe it is more important today that it has ever been in our lifetimes. I think the world is at a turning point. The old rules don't apply. Our old autopilots won't help us. The old instruction manual doesn't work with our new equipment. Our nation is facing a decision about leadership that will make a statement about the very meaning of democracy and our republic. Our world is experiencing refugee displacement in numbers not seen since World War II. Experts consider the flooding in Louisiana, in which my mother and one of my two sisters lost many possessions, to be a prime indicator of what awaits due to global climate change. Through it all, God is still speaking. The question is, are we still listening?