

“Do the Rules Never Change”

(I am Not Breaking the Rules but Creating a New Game)

May 9, 2021

James 1:22–27(NRSV)

But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves.

For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror;

for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.

But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act – they will be blessed in their doing.

If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless.

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

Acts 10:1-16, 34-35 (NRSV)

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called.

He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.

One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, “Cornelius.”

He stared at him in terror and said, “What is it, Lord?” He answered, “Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God.

Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter; he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside.”

When the angel who spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him, and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.

About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance.

He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air.

Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."

But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean."

The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.

Acts 10:34-35 (NRSV)

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him."

Several years ago, a Presbyterian minister, pastor of a church in Indiana, was called before the Presbytery for breaking a rule. The Presbytery, in the Presbyterian tradition, is a regional body composed of clergy and lay representatives of all its congregations, and it functions in our system as a kind of corporate bishop.

John was bright, good preacher, pastor, and his church was thriving. John's wife was seriously mentally ill – for years depressed, suicidal, in and out of mental hospitals. She was more or less permanently institutionalized because of repeated attempts to take her own life.

Her psychiatrists told John that she simply could not be married to him: their relationship dynamic was part of her complicated disease. He should divorce her.

At the time there was a rule on the books that Presbyterian ministers could not divorce.

So, John continued, for years, to pastor his church and father his three children. One of his sons was legally blind and needed special care.

And then he fell in love; there were rumors. He began the process to ask the Presbytery to suspend the rules and allow him to divorce and remarry.

Some agreed that under the circumstances John should be allowed to divorce and start again. Others said, "A rule is a rule. If we make exceptions, the whole system might collapse."

Some of the speakers were pretty judgmental, self-righteous. The vote came, and the decision was to deny his request. He had already broken one rule and was asking to break another. Rules, the church was convinced were right, moral, faithful to God and scripture, and essential. John either would have to give up the woman or his ministry.

He chose to resign his ordination. And then personal trouble started.

He had difficulty finding a job to support his family, sold encyclopedias door to door. Bills mounted: he couldn't afford the special help his son required. He felt guilty, then angry, then depressed. And then one morning John resolved his dilemma: closed the garage door, sat in the driver's seat of his car, turned on the ignition. Rules are complicated. Even at church.

If the gospel is about anything, it is about transformation, change, conversion.

Jesus Christ is always about the business of changing human hearts, human attitudes, human perspectives, human behavior, and even human customs, conventions, traditions.

The most dramatic change, or conversion, that Jesus inspires – is changing the rules that separate people, rules that define people as insiders and outsiders – acceptable and unacceptable, clean and unclean, neighbors and strangers.

Jesus – Christians believe, is God's love embodied, working in the world to heal, reconcile, bring people together into healthy and peaceful and life-giving relationships – with God and with one another. Jesus Christ changes things.

There is a curious Bible story about rules and breaking them in the tenth chapter of Acts. And it is the story of the gospel of Jesus – confronting social and religious convention and inspiring people to change.

Cornelius was an officer in the Roman army of occupation, stationed in the Jewish city of Caesarea. He is a decent man, but is a Gentile, an outsider. He is, by Jewish law, unclean, not because of something he is doing, but because of who he is – a Gentile.

A good Jew could not have anything to do with you. Shaking hands is illegal. Talking to a Gentile is forbidden. Eating at the same table is unthinkable. The Law created a line in the sand – some of you are in and others of you are out.

And so, it is really problematic when Cornelius, the Gentile, has a vision and hears a voice instructing him to send for a man whose name is Peter (a Jew and follower of Jesus) to have dinner with him.

Around the same time, Peter is praying, he is hungry, and also has a really strange vision. Something like a sheet is lowered to the roof of his house, and in the sheet are all

sorts of creatures and reptiles and birds.

A voice says, “Kill and eat.” Peter is horrified.

Because everything in that sheet is forbidden by his religion, by Holy Scripture. Ever since he was a child, it was drilled into him to honor the OT dietary laws: “Every swarming thing that swarms upon the earth is an abomination, it shall not be eaten. Whatever goes on its belly, whatever has many feet – it is an abomination”.

This is not a diet thing; these are dietary laws from the Holiness Code in the book of Leviticus. To break this code is dangerous. Life or death.

The Holiness Code separated everything and everyone into two categories: Acceptable and unacceptable, clean and unclean – and everything on that sheet is unacceptable and unclean. And these laws shaped the early church. And it still does but not always about food.

“By no means, Lord,” Peter says. “I’m not touching that stuff.”

And then he hears the voice again: “What God has made clean; you must not call profane.”

That is revolutionary. That is – for Peter – a world-changing idea.

Cornelius’s men arrive, invite Peter to come with them to Caesarea to meet this Gentile, who is called unclean in Peter’s community.

Peter’s mind is going crazy with this whole idea. But he decides to trust the voice, break with convention, and go – and then two separate and profound conversions happen.

Peter speaks and says something utterly stunning: “I now know that God shows no partiality.”

That was absolutely contrary to everything Peter believed. Peter’s solid foundation, his entire worldview, was seriously shaken.

What happens is even more radical. Peter baptizes Cornelius, this unclean Gentile, and returns to Jerusalem.

The church leaders had got word what Peter had done. They were angry. And calls him on carpet.

“Why in the world did you go to a Gentile, Peter, an unclean pagan? What were you thinking when you sat down at his table and ate with him?” Peter patiently explained how God seemed to be orchestrating this debacle. And when he saw Cornelius’ sincerity and faith, he decided he could not get in God’s way.

The assembled leaders are silent. But they were not happy. And were not at all convinced that God was doing such a new thing. That all the certainties – all the old and precious customs and conventions – all the comfortable ways they had organized the world into clean and unclean – righteous and sinner, insider and outsider – had to be reexamined and – changed.

Change is not easy. And in religion, change can be excruciating. Religion has an affinity for certainty: Though the earth should change, though the mountains shake God is our refuge and strength. (Psalm 46) “Jesus Christ the same, yesterday, today, and forever.” And the more change, uncertainty, and turmoil in the world, the more we hang on to those precious certainties and unchanging truth of faith. We get this. The rules tell us who we are.

The problem is that we expand the certainties of God’s love, grace into forms and structures of our particular brand of religion.

And like Peter who struggled with his own certainties, culture and customs – if we are honest most of us are profoundly threatened by the suggestion – that maybe God is challenging us. To reexamine and sometimes change what we have been embracing so tightly for all these years.

You will recall the last seven words of the institutional church will be “We never did it that way before!”

For centuries, the church was certain that the Bible clearly defined women as secondary and subservient in the church – and society. Very slowly, change came; old certainties were reexamined and discarded with a new truth.

But not until the twentieth century did most churches acknowledge the equal leadership status of women.

And in the year 2012 it is sobering to remember that the two largest religious organizations in the country – the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention – still do not.

For centuries, the church was certain that the Bible also defined a secondary and subservient role for black, brown people, and even defended the institution of slavery as God’s will.

And to its credit, courageous voices of those who remembered the gospel of reconciliation; called the church to change and to get up off its

comfortable pews and into the city streets and courthouses and classrooms and change the world.

Some of us deeply believe that the Holy Spirit is challenging the church to reexamine its old certainties, as we did with women and race, and to reflect something of that radical inclusivity that Simon Peter finally embraced and expressed with so called unclean Gentile Cornelius.

Peter learned to read the Bible in new ways because of Jesus and his vision that crossed all kinds of boundaries. Peter knew what the Bible said about unclean food and eating with unclean Gentiles.

He could proof text with the best of them. But with Cornelius on his knees in front of him, clearly the receiver of God's Spirit – and the Spirit agitating him all night long with those strange dreams, he had to change – and read scripture in new ways.

Paul knew what the Bible said about the subservient role of women when he met Lydia one day in Philippi and baptized her and went home with her and stayed in her home (can you imagine what they said about that?) and made her a leader in the church.

The topic is before us (in church and society) whether we want it to be or not: and the bottom line of this question we are asking is about human equality and worth. And that – that is a concern of our faith.

Peter had to reexamine his own certainties and the way it had always been – and so I believe – we must reexamine certainties drilled into us since childhood and even read the Bible differently and perhaps even change our minds.

There are those of us who want the church to change – and not for a moment do I assume everyone here agrees – but we all need to be very clear about our reasons.

This is not about social liberalism or political correctness. This is about the Bible and the church and the work of the Spirit agitating, pushing, and prodding the church / the world to change.

A mother was scolding her child for breaking the dinner table rules and eating dessert before dinner; and the little girl said with a glimmer in her eye; I am not following the rules; because I am creating a new game. Sounds like Jesus to me.

So yes, thanks be to God, the rules change, and yes, God has created you and me to be responsible moral agents, to make decisions that reflect the one thing that never changes, the one unchanging, eternal absolute: God's unconditional love for the world, for you, for me, for every one of us. There's sermon and the challenge. Amen.

