

Missing Jesus In the Rules

Luke 7:36 - 8:3

Pentecost 2/C

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This sermon was preached by Pastor Kurt Jacobson, Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI.

Dear Friends:

Recently I was watching a group of kids playing a game of softball. It was one of those neighborhood games which kids organize on their own. In the game was a new kid. I figured out he was new because it wasn't long before it became apparent he didn't know the rules by which this group of kids played the game. When he tried to steal second base, he was called out. The boy argued that in his old neighborhood the runner could leave the base after the ball left the pitcher's hand. But that was not the rule with this group and the boy was told that if he wanted to continue playing ball with them, he would have to play by their rules.

Rules - they're an unavoidable, inevitable fact of life. Playing by the rules. No doubt we all could come up with stories about experiences we've had with rules. Most place we go there are rules to follow. Life itself has lots of rules! Some are pretty simple and some profound. Along the path of your life you've learned some - by chance, by instruction and by simple experimentation. The other day I did a search on the phrase "Rules for life" and here's what I found:

- * Never give yourself a haircut.
 - * You only need two tools! WD-40 and duct tape. If it doesn't move and should, use WD-40. If it moves and shouldn't, use duct tape.
- More rules for life:
- * The five most essential words for a healthy, vital relationship are, "*I apologize*" and "*you are right.*"
 - * Everyone seems normal until you get to know them.
 - * If she says that you are too good for her - believe her.
 - * Never lend money unless you are prepared

to write it off

* When you make a mistake, make amends immediately. It's easier to eat crow while it's still warm.

* If you have more than you need, share it with those in need

* Work is good, but it's not that important. Money is nice, but you can't take it with you.

Rules are intended for good, to promote fairness, to protect us from others and ourselves. The rub with rules is that they often seem to be the reason for squabbles. That boy in the softball game didn't get to go back to second base after he tried stealing it. Hard as he tried, he couldn't change the rule. How many of you have tried to talk yourself out of a traffic violation? It's not always the rules themselves that get us into trouble, but the differences we have with others regarding the rules.

In the bible reading from Luke today a squabble over rules arises. Jesus is at a dinner party with some good Jewish people. A man named Simon is the host and he's a Pharisee. Now, Pharisees were religious people and their downfall was that they thought of themselves as superior. They strived to be perfect in following all the rules of religion and culture. In doing so, they often puffed themselves up by maximizing faults of others while they minimized their own. The Pharisees were experts at looking at everybody else's sins.

As Simon's dinner party starts, there is no problem with the rules. All is going well until a woman enters and crashes the dinner party. The bible says she's a "woman of the city" and I'll leave you to define that further. As she comes in she breaks all sorts of rules. She breaks the rule of entering into

a “men only” event. Then, she kneels at Jesus’ feet, begins to cry and with her tears washes his feet and wipe them with her hair. In doing so she breaks two more rules - women did not first touch men and women were not to let their hair down in public in front of men.

Well, you can imagine by this point, Simon, the host of the party was aghast! His dinner party was in shambles and his guest Jesus was not helping get things back on track. Instead, he was allowing the woman to break the rules.

Have you ever been in the midst of someone breaking the rules and a person in authority allowing the rules to be broken? Can you recall to school days when you saw a fellow student doing something wrong - and the teacher overlooking it? Do you remember how you felt? Well, that’s what Simon was experiencing at his own dinner party.

Back to the bible story. As the scene continues, Simon says to himself, but Jesus hears: “If this guy Jesus really were a prophet, he would know what kind of woman is touching him! He would know that she is a sinner.” And implied is this: “If Jesus had any respect for the rules, he would surely send this sinful woman on her way; send her off because she’s breaking the rules. There’s no place for her here!” Get rid of her, Jesus. Simon’s face must have been nearly purple.

Isn’t that how we sometimes want to deal with people who break the rules? Just get rid of them. USA Today a few years ago ran one of their “quick poll reports” which stated that courtroom TV programs are among the most popular on television. Today you could add TV news broadcasts of celebrity trials and court hearings which are given extensive, even live coverage. Did anyone here miss the saga of Paris Hilton a week ago? The USA Today article quoted it’s source saying “Couch potatoes love to see people get judged. It’s fun to see the judge give it to somebody.” We like rules enforced

when we see others breaking them. We like to see what we consider justice to be administered! Sometimes it’s just fun to judge or see someone judged that we deem wrong.

Back to the dinner party and this woman of the city. She gets Jesus’ attention for sure. Simon is ticked. Simon wanted Jesus to toe the line - follow the rules and send the woman walking. But Jesus didn’t. Instead He forgave the woman. Then he touched her with his grace, commended her for her faith, and sent her off with a blessing of peace. And in doing so Jesus taught Simon, this Pharisee (and you and me) something very important. God’s merciful love responds graciously to human need for forgiveness. This woman in demonstrating her respect and love for Jesus was given forgiveness -and she didn’t even utter the words “Please forgive me.”

Have you ever been forgiven without really deserving it? Have you ever been forgiven without first asking for it? Has your parent, a family member, a faithful friend ever forgiven you without you first seeking that forgiveness? If so, then you know this Christ-generated grace that I’m talking about. This is God’s nature. It’s God’s gift in Jesus that transcends any rules or laws that separate us from God’s love.

In just a few minutes we’re going to welcome you to the Lord’s Table. The invitation will be extended to come, take and eat - of Jesus Christ. The invitation comes from Jesus himself who said “This is my body - given for you - for the forgiveness of sin - Do this to remember me”

Over the years of Christian history, this invitation and the participation in this meal has been laden with many rules. Some of you have been the victim of rules which exclude you from the Lord’s Table. I have been at other churches where I’ve been told I wasn’t welcome because I wasn’t part of that particular denomination. I’ve heard your stories of being told you weren’t welcome. I’ve heard your cries of feeling

unworthy to be receive the body and blood of Christ because you didn't think you deserved to be forgiven.

Also, we've debated rules of how to receive the Lord's Supper. Is it necessary to have real wine or unleavened bread? Do we have to kneel? Should we use the common cup - and all drink of the same, one cup? At what age should children be welcome? How many times should we commune - every Sunday - once a month? I recall as a child some of the busy people in the church I grew up in looking sideways at the pastor's wife who communed at both the morning worship services on Sunday. She was the director of numerous children's choirs - and whenever she was in worship, she communed. Did she break the rules? Did it really matter?

The rules of life - and Christian living are necessary for order and direction in our lives individually and together. The story of Jesus allowing the woman to break the rules so that she could receive his forgiveness is an important story for us to remember. For when rules keep any person from Jesus and God's grace and mercy - then they need to be challenged and changed. The greatest rule for the living of our days is that God's love and forgiveness can transcend all things.

So good friends, come, eat, drink of the forgiving, grace-laden love of God for you, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Prayer: Lord, you have dealt with us, not on the basis of what we deserve, but on the basis of your extravagant, unconditional love. As we have seen in today's bible reading, the woman of the city who was a sinner like us all had the courage to risk breaking the rules to come to You. Thank you for her example and for Jesus who sees beyond the rules and barriers we sometimes erect to judge others or keep them away from you.

Inspire in us anew today, a faith and perspective on the truth of your grace and goodness - and instill it in us so that our daily living might better reflect Jesus. Where rules need

changing, give us the energy and will to change them - so that all people will be welcome in your Church and touched by your forgiving love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.