

Proper 16C  
Luke 13:10-17  
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### Tangled Up in the Rules

The Bible is a wonderfully diverse collection of different types of literature — codes of law, poetry, narratives, letters, to name just a few — and it can help to have different approaches for encountering these varied types of text, to help open our hearts and minds to deeply hear God's word and discern the guiding movements of the Spirit within our own lives and within our own time.

One practice I recommend when reading Biblical narratives is to try and place yourself within the story. Instead of simply observing the story unfold from the outside, put yourself in it, within a role, perhaps even trying to identify which role most naturally aligns with who you are. This way of reading the narratives, the stories within the Bible, can help us to dive deeper into a passage's meaning. But I'll warn you, sometimes it can feel a bit uncomfortable.

This week, I made myself uncomfortable. With today's gospel, I had a sense of real empathy towards the leader of the synagogue. I imagined how he worked hard to keep his community on track, doing his best to have his people open their hearts to experiencing God in real and meaningful ways. And following the rules wasn't done for the sake of following rules, but because they were living into following the living God. And one of those rules is how to keep the Sabbath.

Jesus seems to dismiss the "no-work-on-the-Sabbath" rule, for he's healed a woman, setting her free from years of bondage to an ailment, without her even asking. The synagogue leader is trying to get back control of the situation, trying to keep his community aligned with the teachings — by pointing out why this act of healing should have been done on any of the other 6 days of the week, but not the Holy Day.

Jesus responds immediately, telling the authority he's wrong. Wasn't everyone expected to take care of an animal needing help on the Sabbath? How much more should the response be to a fellow human in need? Jesus recognizes what ought to be done, he sees the divine necessity to take care of this beloved child of God, this daughter of Abraham, regardless of the Sabbath rule, for the sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath.

Jesus is teaching us to stop thinking small, to stop getting tangled up in restrictive interpretations and get on with sharing God's love and deep caring for all God's beloved children.

- How often do we get tangled up in the rules, not taking the time to think more broadly about issues and circumstances of our own times?
- Do we, as a community, consciously try to expand our circle — our views boundaries — to encompass Jesus' great love, compassion, and generosity towards one another?

We face persistent reminders of our nation's racial strife. A week ago there was another riot in yet another major city, Milwaukee, after the shooting death of a young black man, Sylville Smith. Yes, he had a record, yes, he was armed, and no, we don't yet know the whole story.

But we do know the result: a devastated family, a community turned upside-down, and the injury of 11 police officers. Nationally, there is continuing unrest, and a growing divide.

I believe that effective solutions to this complex problem will only be found through prayer, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Healing is needed for this growing divide. And we can glimpse how deep the divide actually is, and how divisive the conversations continue to be, as we examine our reactions to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Some are supportive of the overarching goals of this movement, in spite of the its flaws, for change can begin when there's recognition and acknowledgement that real issues of systemic injustice and inequity still exist in significant ways for Americans of color.

And some are very uncomfortable with the Black Lives Matter movement, automatically responding with All Lives Matter.

The statement itself is true. All lives do matter. Life is precious and, as Christians, we are called to love our neighbors as ourselves.

But I'd like to suggest that this "All Lives Matter" response is missing the fact that today, some lives are treated differently. Just as once, not that long ago, the term "separate, but equal" may have sounded okay, it really wasn't. Segregation wasn't some benign decision meant to insure equity among people of different skin color, but perpetuated preserving an under class. And it carried with it a long legacy of fear and oppression, as well an instilling a sense of inferiority for generations of African Americans.

So while all lives do matter, all lives are not treated the same, and that's what needs to be addressed. And that's what the Black Lives Matter movement is trying to say.

Could there be something of that rules-focused-leader within us all, that may cause us to miss that the gospel encourages us to open our eyes and recognize that some of our brothers and sisters still need freedom from bondage — that there are those within our society today, who are treated as less than a beloved child of God?

How can we live into Jesus' compassion and generosity towards one another?

One place to start is to learn more, to better understand and recognize the challenges our brothers and sisters of color face in the world. And there are several opportunities coming up in the next 60 days that we can participate in, either as individuals or as a community.

One involves Brian Stephenson, the author of *Just Mercy*. Stephenson will be speaking at St. Luke's in Atlanta on Thursday, September 28th at 7:00 p.m. There's no charge to attend, but if you're interested, you'll want to get there early. Even if you haven't yet had the time to read *Just Mercy* or investigate the work of the Equal Justice Initiative, this could be a great way to learn about the reality of today's racial divide.

We also have an opportunity to participate in a two-part Diocesan series sponsored by The Beloved Community, our own Diocesan Commission for Dismantling Racism. This series is titled *Racism and Episcopalian Christians' Responsibility* and will be held on 8/30 and 9/13 from 7-9 p.m. This panel discussion, including both clergy and lay people, and is in response to both the emerging civil rights movement and the ongoing racial unrest in America. The first session's at Holy Innocents and the second, at St. Paul's, and you can expect that the discussion will include how we may be called to engaged in dismantling racism within our own communities.

My hope is for our ECOHS family to participate in some or all of these activities, enabling us to continue to grow and discern how we may be led by the Spirit to live into our call to love compassionately within our own community.

Jesus shows us God's purpose: to heal, to liberate, to unbind, and to lead us to freedom.

Jesus encourages us to untangle ourselves from our narrow interpretation of rules, to stretch beyond our normative boundaries, to expand our view of who is our neighbor, opening our hearts to seeing what ought to be done and how we ought to live.

With God's help, we can, in community, live into more fully loving God and all of God's beloved children.

I invite you to turn to page 815 of the BCP, and pray with me the prayer for the human family:

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son: Look with compassion on the whole human family; take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony around your heavenly throne; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*