“***A Woman Set Free***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Aug. 24, 2025

**Hebrews 12:20–23**

20 At Sinai, they could not endure the order that was given, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned to death.” 21Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering 23and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.

**Luke 13:10–17**

10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. 11 And there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand upright. 12 Seeing her, Jesus called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” 13 When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 14 But the synagogue leader was indignant and said to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath.” 15The Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his donkey from the manger and lead it to water? 16 Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” 17When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things done by him.

For our ancient ancestors, fear was a big part of their lives, and it still is for many of us today. And fear was a big part of religion, especially religion with purity codes. Purity systems involved boundaries, barriers, sacred spaces, rules about who could go into what spaces and who could not. Priests could go places that non-priests could not go. Violations of the purity code were severely punished. When the Hebrews were at the base of Mount Sinai, after escaping Egypt, they had a rule that no one but Moses could go onto the mountain upon pain of death, and even if an animal infringed on sacred space, it would be slain (Exod 19:12–13). Purity codes lead to fear and awe.

We don’t have many purity regulations in Protestantism. We may, indeed, have some fear in our lives, and no one can claim to be fearless; but what matters is how we *handle* and adapt to the fears that we do have, whether we grow out of them or not, and whether our religious beliefs hand us over to fear or deliver us from fear (without eliminating awe).

The Hebrews passage assumes that people used to be afraid of God. But the author says we are no longer approaching a Presence of whom we need to be afraid, but a Presence surrounded by worshipping angels and ascended humans. The divine Presence is still a judge, but punishment is not mentioned. God is the one who perfects the spirits of the faithful. So it is a hopeful and uplifting vision, meant to reduce fear in the hearts of believers.

It is comforting to think of approaching God in a setting of rejoicing angels and of fellow humans whose spirits are being perfected. It is alright that humans are imperfect; God will set about perfecting us. This realization gives meaning and value—rather than trepidation—to the concept of approaching God, or even having a conversation with God.

There is a suggestion of fear from one of the characters in the gospel story. The leader at the particular synagogue where Jesus is teaching on that Sabbath wants to instill fear and worry and a narrow-minded interpretation of the law, which says that people should not do any work on the Sabbath. But doesn’t he hear how ridiculous he sounds when he says there are six days to come and be cured, but not on the Sabbath? As though miraculous cures were an ordinary thing that happened every other day of the week!

Jesus makes the point that such strictness is not only foolish but hypocritical. People will loosen the rule enough to allow a donkey to be watered, but they won’t loosen it enough to allow a suffering woman to be helped. Is not a human being of more value than a donkey, and being crippled more severe than being a little thirsty? His opponents are shamed by this rebuke, and the common people rejoice at his mighty deed.

This story resembles some other stories where Jesus showed that humans are more important than strict rules, as when he defended his disciples for gleaning grain on the Sabbath, telling the story of how the followers of David actually went into the temple and ate the bread of the presence that is meant only for the priests, and furthermore, he says, the priests do work in the temple on every Sabbath day (Matt 12:1–5). Then he boldly says “something greater than the temple is here” (12:6), which probably means either himself, the divine Son, or the kingdom, God’s gift to all humanity. In either case, it is something with *actual* value, greater than the temple and its *symbolic* value. In the version of this story in Matthew, he finishes with a stunning lesson that shows that spiritual value is greater than rituals, when he says “if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless” (12:7). He is quoting the prophet Hosea’s anti-sacrificial saying (Hos 6:6), which he also does one other time in the Gospel of Matthew. The version in Mark has different words, but the same meaning, when he says “The Sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Rituals and holy days are meant to help people, but when they are made more important than human beings, then they have been turned into idols, and are harmful. Such hyper-ritualism actually has to do with power and control, and it leads the powerful to “condemn the guiltless.”

Religious rules throughout the ages, in all religions, are usually oppressive and hyper-serious, with no place for tender-hearted concern. The philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev says the ethics of law is enslaving, and ignores the complexity and inwardness of persons. He writes “Christian love is concrete and personal . . . The Christian ethics of the Gospel is founded upon the recognition of the significance of each human soul which is worth more than all the kingdoms of this world” (*The Destiny of Man*, 106–7). The kingdoms of the world think *they* have more value than mere individuals. And the priestly rule-enforcers think the rules have more value than individuals, too. But Berdyaev says “No abstract idea of the good can be put above personality” (*Destiny*, 107).

This is the philosophy we call personalism, which not only values individual persons, but understands personality itself to be a God-given mystery, a bestowal of freedom, a spiritual depth that is not found in anything other than personality. Furthermore, personalism does not lead to isolation, as individualism can.

Personalism includes a healthy respect for, and interest in, other persons. This is one reason that fiction is valuable. Fiction heightens our powers of empathy and understanding of other persons, even if we are working with fictional characters. It’s good practice for us. By appreciating the struggles and challenges of the characters, we heighten our appreciation of the struggles that real people face. At its best, fiction exercises our “moral imagination,” wrote Lionel Trilling. He said “The novel is ‘involved with ideas’ because ‘it deals with man in society’” (literariness.org/2019/03/02/lionel-trilling-and-the-liberal-imagination/). The novel teaches us “the extent of human variety and the value of this variety.” The novel challenges the sterility of systematic thinking and dogmatism. If you have ever thought up a story, you are using your God-given gifts of creativity flowing through your unique personality.

I have wandered a bit here, from a comment about how persons are more important than ritual rules, to the concept of personalism and the value of persons, to the value of the novel in helping us appreciate persons. But there is a through-line there—the value of personality, even its quirkiness and possibly its stubbornness. Are you a stubborn person? Bless you. Tell me a story. Help me to understand you. Will you listen if I tell you a story? Maybe we can have a fellowship of storytellers and listeners around a campfire, perhaps. If it helps us appreciate each other, that would be great.