

JESUS THE RULE CHANGER

Sermon for Epiphany 3C-Lk 4:14-21

LPC, 1/27/13

Whenever my family plays board games, we do well to settle the rules beforehand. The rules that come with the game somehow never suffice for the squirrely exceptions devised by my relations. For instance, is it OK to consult the dictionary before playing your tiles in Scrabble, or is the dictionary to be appealed to only if a played word is challenged? We have learned to establish these norms up front, in the interest of family harmony.

Rules protect people. That's why it's so threatening when rules are changed midstream.

Episcopalians tend to respect rules. The Episcopal Church, with its checks and balances and its consistent worship tends to attract people who appreciate order. But the church's rules are not the only ones we live by. Our culture provides a lot of rules to live by, rules like:

Keep your nose clean. Look out for number one. Be good to gain approval.
Work hard and you'll get what you want. Play the game. Follow the rules.

Are these the rules Jesus plays by?

Look at today's Gospel reading from Luke. Jesus has returned to his hometown, Nazareth, where he has grown up and where everyone knows him as the carpenter's son. He reads in the synagogue, which is his privilege as an adult Jewish male. The passage he reads is from Isaiah, predicting the year of the Lord's favor, when the blind are cured and the oppressed are liberated. And Jesus identifies himself as the agent of these great changes.

If you are blind or oppressed, this is great news. But what if you are of sound mind and body? What if, far from being oppressed, you belong to a more or less privileged class? What if you have taken care to maintain your health and achieved your status or privilege by honest effort? Is it fair that those who may not have done so obtain the Lord's favor, same as you?

Those who have status in Jesus' world are threatened by his predictions. He seems to be changing the rules: rules like keep your nose clean, and be good to get ahead. Plus, it seems to them that this local boy is putting on airs. They get so worked up, they drive him out of town ready to push him off a cliff to punish him for his heresy.

Jesus' heresy is not purely theological here; it is also cultural. Jesus upsets the order of things. He changes the rules. This is much worse than deciding, halfway through the Scrabble game, that you can, after all, consult the dictionary before placing your tiles.

The fact is, it is still true that people who enjoy success are the hardest nuts to crack with Jesus' message of redemption and love. Successful people can get really annoyed when the rules

by which they have played all along, and by which they have achieved success, are challenged by Jesus' indiscriminate message of forgiveness, redemption and love.

We may not consciously believe that material success is the reward for being good and playing by the rules, but that is how our culture works, and we are part of our culture. We are part of the status quo. Jesus' Gospel upsets the status quo, because Jesus makes salvation available to those who screw up. Salvation is offered to those who haven't played by the rules as well as those who always have.

How hard this is to accept when it seems we've had to work for everything we have! How unjust it seems when someone who has obviously not worked as hard has access to the same forgiveness, redemption and love that we do!

Until --- we find ourselves at the bottom of the heap: ashamed, desperate, sad, and very much aware that we're unworthy of God's mercy. Then we really can really appreciate that the love of God is unearned.

If we have been spared sorrow, desperation and shame, that is not a good reason to deplore those who have not been so spared. If we have succeeded in the ways of the world, we are still in the same position, relative to God's love, as those who have not been successful. God's love is unearned.

This is not a license for irresponsibility. No one wants the church to become known as a haven for profane, disrespectful, lying, murderous, covetous idolaters, thieves and adulterers. And certainly profanity, disrespect, lies, murder, covetousness, idolatry, stealing and adultery are not appropriate behaviors for those who are redeemed by God's love. However, no one can say that Christians never do those things. And when we do, it's a darn good thing for us that we have a God who breaks the rules. Especially when we're the ones doing the profanity, disrespect, idolatry, etc., etc., etc.

When things are going well for us, we may resist being placed in the same category as the rest of unwashed humanity, but in this sense we are all the same: we are all God's family, beloved of God. We are all, equally and without merit, offered the benefits of God's forgiveness, redemption and love. We may not appreciate how indiscriminate God is while we're riding high. But chances are, we will slip up sooner or later, and then we'll be glad that God does not play by the rules.

We may as well start being glad now.