

**Luke 13:10-17**

**UNBOUNDING LOVE**

There are many things which we have to balance, to navigate, to work through, as we make our way through the journey which is life. Would you agree? Things like: what is important to us, what our goals are, how we relate to different people, what we focus our energies and priorities on, and I'm sure you can come up with some more. The way we approach and respond to these things in our lives can be determined by many things, such as; the personality we are born with, how we are raised, the experiences we have had in our life, and the values and beliefs we hold at that time. That as people we all have different approaches and responses to these things can make life frustrating at times for us, but it also gives us the width and breath of relationships and societies which we have.

Another issue we often have to each weigh up and respond to is how we live under and respond to the laws and rules we find ourselves under; how bound we feel we are by them. I'm not talking about straight out selfishness and disregarding both rules and the well being of others so we can please ourselves, but what about when we feel those rules are preventing a better outcome for people, what do we do then? This is the stuff of many fictional stories, where the hero has the courage to work outside the law or the rules, but pulls off a great outcome for everyone so that all agree they had the right approach all along. In real life, when people step out with these kinds of rule breaking risks, sometimes they are successful, and so praised for their courage and ingenuity, but at other times they fail and so face punishment for what is then seen not as courage but as rebellion. And of course, there are people, and we probably need them to, who strongly believe that no matter what good outcome may result, rules are there for a reason and that if we begin breaking some for the sake of 'good results', where will it all end?

It is a balancing act, and one we probably have to work with more often than we actually think about. It's also not new, and something Jesus came up against regularly in His ongoing tensions and clashes with the Jewish leaders of His time. One such clash is in the account we have in our reading

today, when Jesus heals a woman who has been crippled, bent over in a way which restricted both what she could do and also how people view her, for 18 years! When Jesus is worshipping in the synagogue on the Sabbath, a day which the Jews kept holy in a much stricter way than we do today, He saw the woman and approached her, and then healed her. After 18 years of being crippled and now being able to straighten up and move freely, imagine how she would have felt! We don't have to imagine, because we are told that she, not surprisingly, praised God.

The other person who features in this account is the leader of the synagogue, and, not surprisingly as a Jewish leader, he speaks out against what Jesus has done. He convicts himself by what he says: he doesn't say that Jesus shouldn't have healed the woman, but has issue that He's done it on the Sabbath. In other words: she's been crippled for 18 years, surely she can wait another day to be healed! Doesn't make him look very caring, does it? Jesus makes this man look even worse when he says that if it's ok to take your ox or donkey to get a drink on the Sabbath, why shouldn't one of God's children be healed? The outcome, we are told, is that all those who were against what Jesus did were made to feel ashamed by what He said, while all the other people praised God for this healing miracle.

The response of the Jewish leaders is one which we probably all shake our heads about. That rigid following of the rules and laws, including when it prevents someone being healed of a long-time physical infirmity, seems ridiculous, especially when the opposition isn't in the fact that Jesus has the power to heal her, but that she should wait for tomorrow for her life to be changed. What do you think when you hear that? It can be hard to know when the rules should be kept and when we need to be a bit more flexible with them, but many of us probably think, along with the people in the crowd, that it was great that Jesus healed this woman straight away. Not only did He bring her physical healing, He also gave her back her dignity in enabling her to go and live her life as everyone else does. How can people possibly object to that?

We do have to be careful before we become too self-righteous here, however. If this account is in Luke's Gospel as a mirror for us all, how often would we see ourselves as being the synagogue leader? Where do we put ourselves on exceptions being made to follow either legal laws and rules, or even

society's norms and expectations, when it comes to people being free from the things that bound them? And in relation to God's Laws, and the rules and expectations we put up as Christians, both of which are what this account is actually all about, how do we react then when things are done a bit differently, which means not in the way we think they should be, or not in the way we are used to them being done? Do we always praise God for what He is doing, or do we grumble because it's not the way we think things should be done, or always have been done, and perhaps it even inconveniences us?

The important thing about this account is that Jesus acts out of compassion. While He is accused many times of breaking the laws of the Old Testament, Jesus says He doesn't come to replace them, but to fulfill them. God's love doesn't exist to serve the Laws, but the Laws are there to enable God's love to be shared and shown in the world. The kind of rigid following, which leads to judging others, that we see on display here shows why when faced with the choice of blindly following the Laws, or showing God's love, Jesus chose love. The Laws exist to serve God's love, not the other way around.

And because that is how Jesus approached this, in this story we get such a good example of how God's love works in our lives. The healing happens on the holy day, in the place of worship, as Jesus heals and frees the woman from what binds her. This reminds us that when we come to worship, God comes to us in His unbounding love also. In remembering our baptism, in having Him come to us in His Word and Holy Communion, in receiving His forgiveness, in praising Him and praying to Him with our fellow Christians, as God now comes to us in all of these ways He comes to free us from our guilt, from the burdens of our expectations or the expectations of others which we can't live up to, from thinking that we can never live up to the way we interpret what He expects of us. We are reminded in all of these ways that God's love saw Jesus die on the cross for our sakes, and that this helps free us the bounding of the struggle of the forgiveness which we find it hard to ask for, and that which we find it hard to give. In Jesus, still today, God frees us from all the things which bind us; what we believe are God's expectations on us, our expectations on ourselves, the expectations others put on us. It is God's unbounding love in Jesus which sets us free.

A question for us then is, how do we respond to this, not just as we experience it in our lives, but as we see it in the lives of others? Are we like the Jewish leaders who condemned Jesus for not doing things the ‘right way’, or like the people who praised God because the woman was set free from what was binding her in her life? For us, what weight do we give to sharing God’s love and compassion, over and against things being done as they should be done or always have been done, in our congregation, the Church, in our nation, our society, our closest relationships? It can be a tough question, for many of us it is a confronting question: as we navigate life’s journey where does showing and sharing God’s love and compassion come in relation to how we or others believe things should be done? How important is it for us that God’s unbounding love is known and experienced by everyone?

These things are hard, and unfortunately I’m not going to give you a black and white answer to approaching this. It is something we need to approach prayerfully and compassionately, asking ourselves what is really important in each situation. And also, being honest with ourselves; is there a just reason why I don’t think that is right, or is it because it inconveniences me and doesn’t fit in with how I think things should be done? God’s unbounding love, the love which frees us from all that weighs us down, the love that frees us to serve and praise Him, is there for us all. It’s the love all people need to know, so He calls us to show and share it with others. Amen.

#### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- How do you approach laws and rules: should they be rigidly followed in all circumstances, or are there occasions when exceptions should be made? If you think there are exceptions to rules, how do you go in deciding when and how these should be made?
- If you were present when Jesus healed that woman, how would you have reacted? (this will work best if you are honest with yourself) Would you have praised God that she was healed? Or, would you have thought there is a time and a place for healing and this isn’t it?
- Again, being honest with yourself, how do you go in weighing up the rules and laws over against showing God’s love? Why is that? If you are being selfish or just don’t want change, ask for God’s help with that.
- Rules and laws are important, and there for a reason. But also important is both us and all people knowing and experiencing God’s love in our lives, the love which frees us from all the things which bound us down. Pray for all the areas in which you struggle with this, both in regard to yourself and to others.

Pray: thank God for His love which sets us free. Pray that He helps us all to both strive to follow His rules and laws, but also to praise Him when His love sets people free.

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