

Unbending Religion

Luke 13:10-17

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Every once in a while I'll run into someone from the church, and for some reason they feel compelled to come up with some excuse as to why they weren't in church the previous Sunday. On the one hand, I am glad that people still recognize the importance of observing the Lord's Day. But on the other hand, I hope that guilt isn't the primary motivation for not missing worship.

Sabbath observance is one of the themes running through this morning's scripture lesson. In the gospel lesson, we see distinct differences of opinion between Jesus and the synagogue leaders as to what constitutes proper observance of the Sabbath. One thing is clear: Jesus wasn't in any way advocating breaking the Sabbath; rather, he was clarifying what it takes to make the Sabbath observance a holy observance.

If ever there was a person who had reason to miss worship, it would have been the woman in this morning's gospel lesson. She had been bent over, unable to stand straight, for over 18 years. She was deformed, in constant pain. Jesus noticed her, and he called her over to him. Jesus touched her, and she was miraculously healed. A magnificent unbending took place in the synagogue.

But there is more than one kind of unbending in the story. On the one hand, Jesus unbends the woman and sets her free from the pain that she had felt for so long. On the other hand, we have the synagogue leaders who can only be described as unbending in their legalistic observance of the Sabbath regulations.

And that is where I want to go this morning, because as we gather on the Lord's Day, we have a choice: do we want our expression of faith to be unbending like the synagogue leaders, or do we want our expression of faith to be unbending in the manner of Jesus? In what way do you want your religion to be unbending?

Usually when I hear the word "unbending," I think of something as being rigid, unyielding. And so to think of religion that is unbending brings to mind images of strict, legalistic attitudes much like the attitudes expressed by the synagogue leaders. When religion is unbending in this manner, then the rules are more important than the message.

This form of unbending religion worships the observance more than the God to whom the observance is supposed to point us. The rules become more important than the God who gave us the rules. The observance of the Sabbath is a perfect case in point. The fourth commandment is relatively straightforward:

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the

alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it.¹

It is a grace-filled command to refrain from work, to rest and honor God. It was only when the religious leaders got their hands on the law and began to define the minutia of what falls into the category of “work” that the joy was taken away from the observance. A person could not walk more than 1000 cubits (about 1500 feet); one could not lift a stone, or move furniture in a house, or aid an animal in giving birth, or gather food, or kindle a fire, or chop wood... The list went on and on and on. In essence, avoiding work on the Sabbath was something that required tremendous work. When religion is unbending in this way, the rules become more important than the God who gave us the rules as a means of grace.

Unbending religion also makes us overlook the things that are truly important. It skews our priorities. As Jesus pointed out to the synagogue rulers, isn't it a bit hypocritical to be able to lead an ox or a donkey to water on the Sabbath, but not to show compassion to a fellow human in need? When religion is unbending in this way, it can make us overlook the things that are truly important.

Today's lesson challenges us: Do we get so focused on rules and regulations that we fail to focus on God? Do we worship the worship, or do we worship God? When you experience unbending religion, is it unbending in the manner of the synagogue rulers?

Or do you experience unbending religion after the manner of Christ? Because you see, “unbending” can be a good word to describe our religion, our expression of faith—good if it describes not so much a rigid attitude as it does a making upright that which was crooked and bent over and burdened.

Jesus un-bent the woman who had been stooped over in pain for so many years. And in so doing, not only did Jesus provide relief and freedom for someone who had been in bondage to physical pain, but Jesus also demonstrated that grace and compassion are at the heart of a true expression of faith in God. In his act of healing on the Sabbath, Jesus declared that there is more to holiness than the correct observance of the Sabbath; indeed, the heart of Sabbath holiness is not so much in the rules and regulations, as it is in being filled with compassion and grace.

Sometimes we use the rules as a way of judging ourselves better than others, or of judging others as somehow undeserving or lesser people. When our expression of faith is unbending on the side of judgment as opposed to compassion, then we lose track of the real meaning of our faith. In his letter to the early church in Jerusalem, James wrote this: Judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!²

Mercy triumphs over judgment! What would the Christian expression of faith look like if Christians spent more time focusing on mercy, and less time being legalistic and judgmental? When Jesus healed the woman in the synagogue, he showed us what unbending religion is really like. Jesus showed that mercy and compassion are at the heart of true Sabbath. Mercy triumphs over judgment.

¹ Exodus 20:8-11

² James 2:13

Michael Lindvall is a Presbyterian pastor who is now on the staff of the 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City. He previously served as the pastor of a small church in rural Minnesota, and he has written a book based on those experiences. He tells of the time just before Christmas when a teenaged unwed mother named Tina Cory brought her infant son forward for baptism. The session meeting in which the baptism was approved was an awkward meeting. The tension was palpable as people expressed their discomfort that baptizing this baby would somehow convey the message that the circumstances under which he was born would also be blessed. Nevertheless, the session approved the baptism.

The tradition of that congregation was for the pastor to ask, "Who stands with this child?", and the family of the child would then rise and surround the infant. Only this time there would just be Tina's mother, Mildred.

But something special took place during that particular December baptism. The church was full, as it always was the Sunday before Christmas... After the sermon, the elder who was to assist in the baptism stood up at the baptismal font and read the words that were written out on a three-by-five card: 'Tina Cory presents her son for baptism.' He kept looking at the card and not at Tina...

Down the aisle she came, nervously, smiling only at the pastor. She was visibly shaking as she carried her newborn infant Jimmy in her arms... The scene was a painful one, every bit as much as everyone knew it would be. So young this mother was, and so alone...

The pastor read the opening part of the baptismal service, noting Mildred Cory sitting strangely out of place in a front pew. Then the pastor asked, 'Who stands with this child?' He nodded at Mildred slightly to coax her to her feet. She rose slowly, looking to either side.

The pastor turned his attention back to his service book. He was just about to ask Tina the parental questions of commitment when he became aware of movement in the pews. Angus MacDowell, one of the feisty old elders of the church, had stood up in his blue suit, [his wife] Minnie beside him. Then a couple of other elders stood up, then the sixth-grade Sunday school teacher stood up, then a new young couple in the church, and soon, before the incredulous eyes of the pastor, the whole church was standing up with little Jimmy. Tina was crying, of course, and Mildred Cory was holding on to the pew in front of her as though she was standing on the deck of a ship rolling in a great wind, which, in a way, she was...³

Mercy triumphs over judgment.

My friends in Christ, we can be unbending in the expression of the Christian faith. But at issue is how we will decide to be unbending. We can be unbending in the sense of strict, letter-of-the-law legality that strips people of joy and fills them with guilt. Or we can be unbending in the manner of Christ, in such a way that all people who experience his special brand of compassion and mercy will come to recognize their identity as children of God.

In what way would you like for us to be known as unbending?

³ Michael Lindvall, The Good News from North Haven, (Guideposts Edition, 1991), pp. 173-174.