

Sometimes Rules Are Made To Be Broken

Acts 11:1-18

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“Rules are made to be broken.” Some folks wince hearing this, others readily agree. Usually the ones wincing are traditionalists who become instinctively nervous when their favorite, time honored customs are threatened. On the other hand, those who readily agree are often rebels at heart who feel confined by tradition.

Those of us old enough, remember the 60’s, when the slogans “Question Authority” and “Don’t Trust Anyone Over Thirty” became the mantras defining the decade. The protestors wanted radical change and the traditionalists fought back and by the time things finally simmered down the culture, for better and for worse, was changed forever.

This morning’s gospel story from the Book of Acts is an affirmation of the saying, “Rules are made to be broken,” but don’t try looking for too many similarities between what happened then and what happened in the 60’s. Here’s why:

Despite the best of intentions, because of human nature all of us are prone to becoming self-righteous in promoting our pet causes. It’s true isn’t it? We can become so convinced, “I’m right and they’re wrong,” we start stereotyping and ultimately dehumanizing each other.

Now, it’s not my intention to either celebrate or deprecate those who identify themselves as traditionalists or those who enjoy being rebels. Whether you consider yourself one or the other, you both have something important to say, and it’s through thoughtful conversation with each other that something good and lasting usually emerges so we can then move forward.

But before we can move forward, there needs to be some acknowledgment that some rules are made to be broken, so something new can emerge in its place. Usually the prime candidates for scrutiny are those time-honored rules that can only be defended by saying, “Because we’ve always done it this way.”

I’ve told you before about the young husband watching his new bride prepare a roast. Before putting it in the pan she cut off two inches from the end. “Honey, why did you cut off two inches from the end?”

“Because,” she answered, “that’s the way my mother always did it.”

A week later the young husband asked his other-in-law, "Why did you always cut off two inches from the roast before putting it in the pan?"

She replies, "Because that's the way my mother always did it."

Sometime later he asked the grandmother, "I'm dying to know, why did you always cut off two inches from the end of the roast before putting it in the pan?"

She replied, "Because my pan was too small."

Case in point, some rules are made to be broken.

But what if this time-honored rule comes from God? What if it's in the Bible? What do you do then? That was the dilemma faced first by Peter and the leaders of the Jerusalem Church after Peter entered the home of a Gentile and ended up baptizing them.

Peter was praying in the city of Joppa when he suddenly had a vision of a huge white sheet coming down from heaven holding all types of animals. A voice commanded, "Get up Peter, kill and eat." But Peter refused. "No way Lord, for nothing profane or unclean ever entered my mouth."

Let's stop right here and give some background. From the time of Abraham, the people of God were meant to be separate and different from all the surrounding tribes and nations. Two practices in particular marked them as unique, circumcision and their dietary laws.

The purpose of circumcision and the dietary laws was to set the Jews apart from the Gentiles so they could become an outward visible sign of God's presence in the world. But there was a slight problem. The unintended consequence of these laws to reinforce the Jewish identity was self-imposed segregation. But in the beginning didn't God promise Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you...and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed?" (Genesis 12:3) How could Abraham's descendants be a blessing to all the families of the earth if they avoided them like the plague?

Understandably, Peter, being a practicing Jew, was probably physically repulsed by the thought of eating "unclean." But this command also troubled him ethically. "How can I break one of the most time-honored rules of my ancestors?" The law clearly stated, "Thou shalt not." No loopholes or wiggle room. "Thou shalt not." Period.

It was at the end of his vision Peter was unexpectedly interrupted by three men from that hornets nest of Gentiles, Caesarea Philippi. Right away Peter

sensed God was somehow in the mix so he went with them without prejudice. When he arrived at the house, the host reported an angel instructed him to send for Peter “who will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.” Before Peter could say a word, it was Pentecost all over again as the Holy Spirit was suddenly poured out over the man’s family. What else could Peter do but baptize them then and there?

We know from the Gospels Peter earned the reputation for being impulsive and as word got back to Jerusalem about Peter’s unorthodox, maybe even heretical behavior, the Jewish Christian leaders had to be saying, “There he goes again!” At the same time Peter had to realize, “I have a lot of explaining to do.”

Sure enough, the moment Peter returned, the other apostles criticized him. “Why did you break the rules Peter?”

Maybe because some rules are made to be broken? Peter told the story of his vision, the sudden invitation to Caesarea Philippi, and the Holy Spirit’s Pentecost-like reappearance. He then asked the brethren, “What else could I do but baptize them?”

Immediately the recriminations ceased. Momentarily awed and silenced by Peter’s testimony they suddenly broke into discernment and praise. “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life!”

Keep in mind the other Apostles could’ve dug in their heels and censured Peter warning, “Don’t you EVER do that again!” But they didn’t. Some rules are made to be broken.

The history of the Church documents the ongoing struggles over time-honored rules, customs and traditions. Some of these controversies have been trivial and totally unnecessary, like whether or not to change the color of the carpet in the sanctuary. (“It’s always been red!”) Other struggles were huge and necessary, think of Martin Luther, John Calvin and the Reformation.

What’s more we can’t escape the fact the Church came into being through rule breaking. Isn’t rule breaking the reason for Jesus crucifixion? His ministry was all about ushering in something new and wonderful, a transformational movement he called the Kingdom of God. It makes me wonder. When the Apostles were silenced by Peter’s testimony, in that silence, were they remembering Jesus breaking rules that stifled community and compassion and kept the tax collectors and sinners from experiencing God’s grace?

Fred Craddock, a preaching and New Testament professor told a story about visiting a prominent congregation that was suffocating from its treasured traditions and discriminatory gate keeping (i.e. many visitors never returned

because they were never properly welcomed by the members). Some years later Craddock passed by the same church which was now a trendy restaurant. He went in and saw the sanctuary filled with tables and chairs, and where the communion table once stood, a large salad bar. Craddock concluded by saying, "Now I guess everybody is finally welcome to eat at the table."

This morning we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion. At the Last Supper Jesus reinterpreted the Passover meal that sealed the covenant God made through Moses at the Exodus to be the new covenant in his own blood. One of the essential insights the early Church embraced was the covenant or promise God made with his people was more important than the Law. The Law of Moses was only meant to be a short term stop gap to give the people guidance until Christ came to write the new law of love on our hearts. That's why Jesus readily broke some of the rules. They outlived their usefulness and now, through Christ, God was birthing something brand new.

May we be empowered by the Spirit to follow Christ's example, being both wise and discerning, whenever we are led to consider whether any time-honored custom, tradition or rule has run its course so we can cooperate with the Holy Spirit birthing something new and wonderful for our good and the good of the Holy Church and the ministry and mission that is our sacred calling, through Christ our Lord. Amen.