

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 11th Sunday after Pentecost, August 25, 2019.

All of us, I suspect, have broken a rule for what we perceive as the greater good. We break the speed limit in order to get home because there is an emergency there.

Jesus does this in this morning's gospel (**Luke 13:10-17**). He knows the rule. From the Prophet Isaiah: "If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

The rule is clear, yet Jesus chooses to heal a crippled woman on the Sabbath. "When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.'" But the leader of the synagogue – just doing his job – is indignant. "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, not on the Sabbath day." Jesus answers the leader: "You hypocrites!" He goes on to explain that there is a greater good to be pursued than strict observance to a rule, even a Sabbath rule.

We have been in both roles. We have broken a rule for what we perceive as the greater good. And we have called out people, including our children, for thinking their need is more important than obedience.

Does this conversation sound familiar?

Do you have any homework?

Yes, I have a paper to write?

When is it due?

I'm supposed to turn it in on Friday.

The conversation continues Thursday night.

Have you finished your paper?

No, I will turn it in on Monday.

But it's due tomorrow.

I know, but I've been helping a classmate with a problem.

Is it a life or death problem?

No, but it's important to my friend and to me.

That's no excuse.

Well, Jesus did it. "Greater good." Remember, Dad? You told me that sometimes I would have to choose. Just like Jesus.

So, where do we go from here? How do we handle this impasse? Maybe the passage from Hebrews can help (**Hebrews 12:18-29**). Or maybe not. This lesson is a challenge in itself.

For the Jews, as for us, God is powerful and God is loving. God as power is revealed on Mt. Sinai. God as loving is revealed on Mt. Zion. On Sinai, God tells us that we are expected to obey. On Zion, God tells us that we can seek God's mercy. God is not just one or the other. God is both Creator and Savior. And, for the Jews, as for us, life is spent in some kind of balance between these options. Do we trigger "consuming fire" through our misbehavior, or do we seek the "new covenant" through an expanded understanding of love of neighbor?

So, how does this lesson help with our homework situation? Would the lesson have helped Jesus wrestling with what to do or not do on the Sabbath? Break the rule for the greater good, or obey the rule and let things take their course?

Well, what the lesson from Hebrews confirms is that tough choices are a part of life, and that to insist on one kind of response – rote obedience - at the expense of an optional response – it depends – is not realistic, given our propensity to take the less desirable road some of the time.

Contrary to what many view as dogmatic, the Judeo-Christian Faith is situational. Sometimes rote obedience is the best path. Other times "it depends" is the better path. We need to remember that the "it depends" path, the situational path, isn't necessarily at odds with what God desires, but perhaps is exactly what God desires.

Wishy-washy? Perhaps. Many of us were influenced in the mid-1960s by a book by Joseph Fletcher called Situation Ethics: the New Morality. It was a threat to some, and a relief to others. Well, sometimes something that threatens both ends of a spectrum is not wishy-washy, but wise. Wise because it reflects real life decision-making situations, situations that sometimes involve parents and children.

Wisdom is something we definitely want to instill in our children. And part of wisdom is being sensitive to situations. Jesus in the temple was sensitive. He took the situational path. He healed the woman. In so doing, he knowingly invited the anger of the Temple leaders. But the greater good was the woman's health.

As it turns out, Fletcher's book was not about a new morality. It might better have been entitled a morality revisited. You see, Jesus was absolute in terms of God's love, but very much situational in terms of applying that love.

Well, back to our student and back to us. Was the student really thinking of the greater good when he postponed the paper to help a friend? Let's give the student some credit, and say yes. And let's see if Jesus is a useful benchmark. The answer here, if we are interested in doing God's will, also yes.

It's not as if Jesus the man might disagree with God the Father? They are One, after all. And since they are One, a good rule of thumb really is to ask "What would Jesus do?" As an approach, it can't hurt, and it might help. Maybe it's not appropriate to every situation, but, at least, let's ask the question.

Remember, the whole purpose of Jesus is to speak for God the Father when it comes to making tough decisions. This is why the New Testament - the Story of Jesus from conception to birth to life to death to new life to return to the Father - is so important. This Incarnation is central to our understanding of God.

Does this mean that all decisions we make are easy? No. But what it does mean is that, as we seek the best approach to a problem, asking what Jesus would do is a pretty solid strategy. Well worth adopting for ourselves and our children. Isaiah describes the outcome of such adoption: "The Lord will guide you continually,

and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.”

Here’s another, more contemporary version, of this outcome. Parent to child: I probably would have made a different decision, but I respect your concern for your friend. Recognize that your teacher might not be as forgiving. Best to share with the teacher your dilemma and the path you have chosen. And then live with the results.

To which the child might say “Really, Dad?” Welcome to parenthood. Amen.

