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Breaking the rules

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Mar. 9, 2013 Spiritual Reflections

Jesus chose to associate with people whom the rest of his contemporaries found reprehensible. Today, we are used to this notion, and we tend to romanticize his behavior. In his own time, however, it was shocking and offensive. Jesus? manner was so off-putting that many people could not move beyond their repulsion to hear and accept his message. In a word, he was a rule-breaker, an iconoclast, and those who would follow him with integrity are to do the same.

Fourth Sunday of Lent
Joshua 5:9, 10-12
Psalm 34
2 Corinthians 5:17-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

According to the rule of the day, associating with known sinners or the sick or the unclean rendered a person ritually unclean and therefore unfit to participate in communal rituals, like liturgy, common meals or conversations. Fully aware of this rule, Jesus purposely moved among those with whom others would not associate. He went to their homes. He ate with them. He talked with them. He touched them and welcomed them to himself.

In order to fully appreciate how shocking were the actions of Jesus, Barbara Brown Taylor has suggested that we make the characters featured in the sacred texts real (*The Preaching Life*, Cowley, 1993). I do not know how they look to you, says Brown Taylor, but I imagine Jesus down at the plasma bank, standing in line with the hung-over men waiting to sell their blood. I see him at the city jail talking to those waiting to be arraigned. Can you see him at the diner, talking with a drug dealer? I can see him with his arm around the young man with AIDS as I come in with my kids and sit down a few booths away. How is it that Jesus is spending time with the very people whom I warn my kids to avoid?

If we imagine these ?undesirables? in terms of our own life experience, we might more readily understand how the scribes and Pharisees felt about Jesus. They loved the law and were willing to make great sacrifices to observe it faithfully -- and then Jesus came along and suggested, by his works and words, that they did not understand who God was or how God loved. They were angry that he broke the rules they were so proud to keep. But this is precisely the reason why Jesus became one of us and came to live and move among us: so that we might know God and begin to live according to God?s rule of love.

As a rule of thumb, people who venture out into the desert without provisions and wander aimlessly through its

vast expanses usually die. But God saw to it that Moses and those he led out of Egypt traveled safely, with food, water and God?s own presence to protect them (first reading, Joshua). Similarly, according to the rules of human justice, those who do wrong pay dearly until restitution is made and their punishment is met. But God?s rules and God?s justice are colored with love and woven rich with mercy. Though we are sinners, Christ took it upon himself to suffer and die that we might be reconciled to God and to one another (second reading, 2 Corinthians).

If the father featured in today?s Gospel had followed the rules and the law of his day, he would have held no obligation to the son who demanded and then squandered his inheritance. He could have closed his door and his heart, and no one would have faulted him for his actions. But like God, whom the father represents, he was not driven by rules but by love. The father?s love and forgiveness were far, far greater than the grievousness of the son?s wrongdoing. The father rejoiced as God rejoices over every repentant sinner.

Like the father, like God, Jesus eschewed the ?rules? that would have condemned and alienated sinners. Jesus? example challenges each of us to examine the rules by which we live and to consider whether these are in accord with the truth of the Gospel.

For example, there is a rule that permits a mother to end the life of her unborn child. There is also a rule that allows a government to hunt down, arrest, imprison and deport its undocumented workers, thereby separating parents from their children and spouses from one another. In some states and nations, the rule permits capital punishment as well as incarceration without rehabilitation. Using the euphemism ?death with dignity,? some have voted into law the option of taking their own life. When these options are set into motion, those who take them excuse their choices with the fact that their actions are legal; they have broken no rules. But if these rules were held up to the truth of the Gospel, how might they fare? Would Jesus keep these rules, or would he set them aside and instead follow the rules of love and mercy?

[Patricia Sánchez holds a master?s degree in literature and religion of the Bible from a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.]

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