

Standing Tall

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 21, 2016.

She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Luke 13:12

As Jesus goes about teaching and healing, the Pharisees, as the keepers of the law challenge him frequently on his interpretation of the law. In particular, there should be no work of any kind on the Sabbath. Yet, it is on the Sabbath that Jesus heals a woman who has been afflicted with a severe back condition. For nearly two decades she had been unable to stand up straight. Now that she has been healed of her affliction, she praises God with rejoicing.

Instead of sharing in her joy, the leader of the synagogue criticizes Jesus for ignoring the law against working on the Sabbath. He argues that he should have waited until the Sabbath was over. Anyone who has been kept waiting in a doctor's office knows that when you are ill and in pain the last thing you want is to have to sit and wait for a long time. The significance of the woman's back condition is that she was forced into a posture of humility and submission and it affected how she was treated by other people. After decades of not being able to stand up straight, she regains her dignity and can look everyone in the eye for the first time.

Though Jesus is well aware that working on the Sabbath is considered an offense against God, he has good reason for not delaying her healing. There is no reason why she should have to have wait until the Sabbath is over to be relieved of her suffering. He ignores religious custom, rules and regulations in order to accomplish a greater good. And, he is willing to take the consequences of doing the right thing for the right reason at the right time. Though it is the Sabbath, her healing has priority because the commandment of love is ingrained in the intent and spirit the law. This is giving priority to grace over hypocrisy.

One of the major issues in this election year is deregulation. There are laws and regulations that make sense because they are for our own safety and protection. Where there are laws that are counter-productive and defy common sense, they need to be changed. It is never the wrong time to do the right thing. Jesus urges a new understanding about the purpose of religious customs and legal practices. A bishop, who was a lawyer before he became a bishop, once said that the canon laws of the church are "the bad side of the Good News."

Historically, there were unjust laws that allowed discrimination against people of color prevented them from attending public schools, shopping in stores, being served in restaurants, getting hotel accommodations and purchasing homes. We can be thankful for those brave souls who stood up straight to challenge racially unjust laws. In their opposition against segregation in public areas, they were willing to accept the consequence of being reviled as troublemakers.

There can be no denying that racism is still a factor in our society. The election of an African American president did not signal an end to racism. The current political climate in which political correctness is scorned has given tacit approval to using derogatory terms with regard to race, religion and ethnicity. Those who take exception to the Black Lives Matter movement need to understand that for too long black lives have not mattered. Misogynistic attitudes have encouraged demeaning behavior toward women. None of this can be excused as humor or sarcasm because there is nothing funny about racism or sexism.

The lawyers accused Jesus of attempting to abolish the law. He did not come to abolish the law; he sought to fulfill it with the right intent. To love your neighbor as yourself fulfills the demands of the law. The law is necessary because without it, anarchy results in chaos and disorder. In an effort to do the right thing, there are basically two approaches to making decisions. We can choose to go by the book and apply rules and regulations without regard to circumstances. Or, we can consider the conditions and circumstances of each situation as it applies to established law. All the facts are considered in the light of how the law applies. The situational approach is based on the Biblical "golden rule" to love and respect our neighbor as we love and respect ourselves.

Love is the one absolute in determining right and wrong. Selfless love places the concerns of others over our own. It is the basis of intrinsic good on which all morality is based. The one simple but profound truth is that we treat others the way we want to be treated. It enables us to be kind to unkind people. It enables others to love us when we are unlovable. Loving and liking is not the same. We can care about those whom we don't like and wish them well. It is by God's grace that we deal with complex situations and people.

To ignore the suffering of others is a spiritual disability. If we pretend not to notice the disabled, the chronically ill, the poor and destitute and victims of abuse, we need to stand up straight and look them in the eye. There is no nobler effort than to raise our heads in awareness of what can be done to provide hope for alleviating human suffering. We can't make assumptions about the conditions in which people live. It is all a matter of perspective. We never stand taller than when we have the compassion to reach down to lift someone up.

We are all intertwined in our common humanity. When one suffers, all are affected. Compassion moves us to respond to people in need with the resources at hand. When we are with someone who is going through a serious illness or recovering from surgery, we need not worry about what to say. There can be more said in just being there and sitting quietly and holding a hand. We all have the capacity for empathy and understanding. It is of great value and it costs us nothing. The grace freely received is freely given.