

A summer Bible Camp needs a schedule; a rule of the day. Everyone needs and wants to know what we will be doing from one hour to the next. What will be expected of us, and when is snack time! Every morning when the children arrived for Camp last week the first thing they did was look at the board to see what would be happening on that day. Then, inevitably most would run to me and ask questions...what are sand candles, how do we make sun prints, what are we having for snack today?

From the time we are born we have things that are expected of us, and a schedule in which to do it. There is nap time, feeding time, bath time and play time. At various points in history pediatricians and child psychologists have emphasized the importance of a schedule for a baby or a developing child.

Of course rules and schedules don't end as we grow. School has a schedule, work has a schedule. For heaven's sake, even our liturgy on a Sunday morning more or less follows a predetermined schedule and order. Our armed forces could never function efficiently if there wasn't a strict schedule, set of rules and regs, and the expectation that they will be obeyed. More than about efficiency, disciplined adherence to regulations can be a matter of life and death for soldiers, and so rules must be strictly obeyed.

The rules and regs for the Jewish people are found in the Torah. We read from Deuteronomy this morning the passage in which Moses tells the people some of the most important commands that God has given us to discipline our lives. The purpose of discipline though, is not rules for rules sake. God's commandments are for us to live good, productive, happy lives. The one we focus on today is the commandment that we take Sabbath time, a time to rest. God gives the people a specific explanation as to why this commandment is important. The reason given is: **“Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your**

God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.” (Deut. 5:15)

Remember that you were a slave. Slaves don't get time off. There is no slave union. There are no contracts between masters and slaves that set forth how many hours a slave will work and what time off he or she receives. God reminds the people that they are now free. Freedom for the Hebrew people meant that they were in charge of their own time, their own work and their own religion. It also meant that they were obliged to treat their slaves better than they themselves had been treated in Egypt. The laws in the Torah reminded the Jewish people that they do have a contract. They have a contract or covenant with God, and that contract is kept because of the thankfulness they have to God who freed them from slavery and sustained them in the wilderness and continues to sustain them.

So, there are good reasons for the laws of the Torah. There were probably good reasons for all 613 laws in the Torah at one time. But there are laws and then there are laws. Some are basic to our lives and last forever. Some become outdated and need to be re-imagined or set aside. One of my favorite examples is in the Book of Leviticus. In chapter 19 God tells the people that they shall love their neighbor as themselves. This is a seminal law. Hugely important. Then, in the very next verse God says, “you shall not put on a garment made of two different materials.” We don't really need that law anymore. We invented dry cleaning. But there they are right next to each other. One of our most crucial laws and one that is no longer necessary to follow.¹ In this example it is clear what law should be steadfastly kept and which we can now safely ignore. With other laws it is not so clear.

That brings us to Jesus and his healing on the Sabbath. Let's look at this story from the point of view of the leader of the synagogue. He has been a faithful Jew all his life. He was made

¹ **Leviticus 19:18-19** ¹⁸ You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. ¹⁹ You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your animals breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.

the leader most likely because of his knowledge of Torah law, his wisdom in interpretation and his ability to lead the people. He has welcomed in the visiting rabbi, Jesus, and allowed him to teach in his synagogue.

It seems that the visitor has attracted quite a crowd because of his fame. One among the crowd was a crippled woman, and the visiting rabbi, this Jesus fellow, then calls her over to him and prays over her. The leader thinks to himself, "How dare this fellow come into my synagogue, and then break the torah law. Doesn't he know anything about how we do things around here. It's God's law that this young rabbi is breaking. Doesn't he know the law? We are not to work on the Sabbath. Healing is considered work, and therefore, Jesus, you are breaking God's law."

But Jesus looks at the bigger picture. Do you remember the words of Jesus from the Gospel of Mark on this matter?

²⁷ **"The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath;** Mark 2:27

Jesus has to explain himself and so he does. We free our animals to eat and drink on the Sabbath, so why wouldn't we free a woman who has been crippled for 18 years on a Sabbath. Jesus put the emphasis, on the heart of the law. We have been freed by God from slavery. We have the responsibility to free others from their slavery if we are able. That is the heart of the commandment of Sabbath rest.

Discipline, tradition, laws and regulations are all important for us to keep us safe and to set us free to do the things that we want and need to do.

The problem with us as humans is that we sometimes have a hard time knowing when laws must be strictly enforced and when they need to be relaxed or changed.

Some of the greatest war stories are not about keeping the regulations, and following commands, but about when and where it is appropriate to use our God given wisdom to know when to **not** follow orders. But it is a touchy business, of course. The whole sordid affair at the Abu Ghraib prison is just such a story. If an officer commands an enlisted man to torture

someone, should he or she follow that order or not? We have to go back to the heart of all of God's commandments – Love God and love our neighbor.

There is a famous war story about a conversation in 1944 between a certain Army Chaplain of the Third Army and General George Patton:

General Patton: Chaplain, I want you to publish a prayer for good weather. I'm tired of these soldiers having to fight mud and floods as well as Germans. See if we can't get God to work on our side.

Chaplain O'Neill: Sir, it's going to take a pretty thick rug for that kind of praying.

General Patton: I don't care if it takes the flying carpet, I want the praying done.

Chaplain O'Neill: Yes Sir, May I say, General that it usually isn't a customary thing among men of my profession to pray for clear weather to kill fellow men.

General Patton: Chaplain, are you teaching me theology or are you the chaplain of the Third Army. I want a prayer.

Chaplain O'Neill: Yes Sir.²

Evidently the General got his wish. The chaplain followed orders. The praying was done. The weather improved and the Allies were able to advance toward the Rhine River. Chaplain O'Neill was awarded a Bronze Star for his efforts.

The chaplain might have questioned the order he was given, but he did not.

What Jesus teaches us through this story in the Gospel today, is that we must think of the Laws in such a way as to remember the intent behind the law. Here is a case where scripture, tradition and reason must all be taken as authority. Just as Jesus did.

The leader of the synagogue was absolutely right to honor the Sabbath. We all need to honor the Sabbath and give ourselves Sabbath time. Me too. But on my Sabbath day, Monday, things happen, people get sick, and the rule of keeping Sabbath must bend to serve people and set them free from slavery to rules.

² Quoted from *Prayer, A History* by Philip and Carol Zaleski, Houghton Mifflin Co. 2005

Each time I lead children in a camp or a mission trip I learn that same lesson over again too. The children and teachers cannot be slaves to the schedule that I have set forth. The situation changes. The weather changes. We have to allow for activities that take longer or shorter than expected. The schedule is made for the children and not the children for the schedule.

God grant us the serenity to accept the things we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.