

A sermon preached by the Revd RL. Ficks III at Church of the Good Shepherd, Houlton, Maine on the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (8/25), 2019

Isaiah 58:9b-14; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

Jazz musician Cab Calloway died some years ago. People who knew him describe him as a man of dignity and humor. One night at Birdland, the legendary jazz bar, Cab was introducing a promising young saxophone player. As the sax player finished his set, a self-appointed jazz critic came over to him and said, in front of Cab, "You aren't that good, man. All you can do is play like Charlie Parker."

Cab took the young man's sax and handed it over to the critic. "Here," he said, "you play it like Charlie Parker."

Isn't it true that whenever you are trying to do something significant, somebody comes around to criticize? My Grandmother called them busybodies.

As Yogi Berra once said: "Anyone who is popular is bound to be disliked"...or, in other words, there's always a critic around to find fault.

In Luke's Gospel this morning, we hear of Jesus healing a severely crippled woman. She had been bent like that for eighteen years...unable to straighten herself up. Jesus saw her, had compassion on her, and healed her...and she responded with thanks and praise.

But, as Yogi suggested, there was a critic present. The ruler of the synagogue where Jesus was teaching that day was, we are told, "indignant" because Jesus healed this woman on the Sabbath. "There are six days in which work ought to be done," this ecclesiastical busybody said. "Come on those days and be cured, but not on the Sabbath day."

The ruler of the synagogue was upset because Jesus was breaking the rules. Can't you just hear him...in his sternest voice..."We have a rule...No healing on the Sabbath?"

Have you ever noticed how many stupid things are done because there are rules?

Greyhound bus lines had a rule: No pets on their buses. And so late one night at a rural truck stop in Florida a Greyhound driver kicked an 80 year old woman off his bus. Her crime? She was returning home from her birthday party with her present: a tiny puppy named Cookie. You may know the story. Dogs aren't allowed on Greyhound buses, and the driver refused to make an exception, leaving this poor elderly woman about 80 miles from home at 3.00am. Can't you hear the bus driver justifying his actions? "We have a rule. We have a rule." A security guard summoned by the bus driver called sheriff's deputies to escort her away adding to this poor woman's fright. "When the bus pulled away, and I saw all those policemen I was scared," she said. "I thought they were going to put me in jail." What could have quickly become a terrifying ordeal for the woman, who walks with a crutch and has trouble hearing and seeing, instead became an inspiration. After getting her a sandwich and a cup of coffee, police from five different jurisdictions teamed up to ferry her home.

Greyhound had a rule. The religious leaders of Jesus' time also had rules. And most of these rules were good...including the one about not working on the Sabbath. Would any of us disagree that it would be better if no one had to work on the Sabbath? Then families could have time to be together. People could slow down and have a day of rest and relaxation. We could see to our religious duties with a minimum of disruption. But would we close the hospitals? Of course not.

Some things are more important than rules and regulations. Jesus healed a woman and was criticized because this was on the Sabbath. But Jesus answered his critic and called him a hypocrite. In a glorious analogy, Jesus noted that people will untie their ox or their donkey and lead them to water on the Sabbath. Would they begrudge it that this woman, who had been bound for eighteen years, should be set free?

In performing this miracle Jesus established a principle that needs to be engraved in our hearts: Rules and regulations are important...they give shape and coherence to a functioning society...civil discourse...reasonable behaviour...guidelines in uncertain situations. But the thing that matters most to God is people. This is the central message of the Gospel. The only thing God really cares about is people.

When there was good reason...human reason...reasons of compassion and caring, Jesus broke the rules, and he healed a woman on the Sabbath. Jesus wanted those about him to see that God's love for God's children is greater than God's adherence to rules and laws.

Each of us is called, by the very nature of our baptism, to be willing to look closely at the myriad situations we confront every day and make certain we are not using rules as an excuse to avoid respecting the dignity of every human being...for loving our neighbor as ourself, for, at our baptisms, we have promised to respect that dignity and manifest that love.

It would have been easier for Jesus to avoid the difficulties of healing on the Sabbath. To do so would have left a woman who was acutely crippled just as she had always been and failed to offer her the dignity of wholeness and healing...that state of being which has at its root the Latin word...*salvus*...salvation. He would not do that. Can we?