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From the Pulpit

Sermon Series ~ *A Long Road in the Same Direction: Jesus' Journey Towards Jerusalem*

Sermon ~ *Ruling Out Jesus*

The Reverend Matthew Gough ~ March 27, 2011

Luke 11: 37-54

When I was between the ages of two and three, I was in the backyard with my father who was showing me the young apples that were appearing on his dwarf Apple tree. He said to me, "now Matt, these apples aren't ripe so I don't want you to pick any of the apples. You understand?" I'm sure I nodded. Not long after that, my father returned home from work and went to the backyard to check how his apples were coming along. To his surprise and dismay, he noticed that each apple within the height range of a young toddler had a toddler sized bite mark. In my defense, I did not pick any of the apples. I followed the rules.

And so it is that from a very young age we are learning the rules, how to live with rules, and maybe how to manipulate them to get what we want.

We join Jesus on his journey towards Jerusalem when very successful rule followers and keepers of the rules have invited him to dinner. They have been watching Jesus carefully, and at times have already raised alarms and protests when he didn't follow the rules, and so too are they watching him at dinner. Jesus knows this. He doesn't waste any time and gives them just what they want.

Jesus does not wash his hands. This was a big problem. He's not just being unhygienic. This is not about germs. In the minds of the Pharisee and lawyers he is breaking God's law.

What is he doing? Is Jesus just a trouble maker? Here he has a chance to sit at the table with the powerful, the ones who hold the ability to change things, people who could perhaps negotiate with Jesus and hear his complaints about their imperfect system. But no. Jesus opens with a clear message that he isn't there to play by their rules.

Is Jesus just one of those who just doesn't like the rules? That's not consistent with his teachings. He gives a great deal of instruction and commandments. In fact, there are times when he seems to make the law even harder to follow than what these Pharisees were asking: It's not enough to not commit adultery but those who lust after another's spouse are guilty also, those who say "You Godless Fool" are guilty of murder. (This is a different more harsh and condemning word in Greek than the word used in this passage which means irrational or ignorant).

Jesus raises the bar and his rules are impossible to keep. With his rules we will always fall short.

We live by rules, laws, customs, traditions. We have our ways and we need our ways. Rules give us structure. We have to have rules to function and live together. My toddler must wash his hands before coming to the table! I've seen where his hands go. Life is one long journey of discerning, learning, mastering, and sometimes manipulating the rules.

When someone or something challenges our ways we can be ruthless when they are threatened.

Churches aren't immune. Right now we are in a period of great change within the church. The generations that so faithfully planted, built, and preserved the church and her traditions find themselves faced with generations who don't want to play by their rules, who aren't interested in the same traditions and customs. New music, new technology, new ways to tell our story and the story of Jesus. It's threatening and it can be felt personally. The rules within churches are changing and it can be unsettling.

The bigger challenge is that the majority of people are simply ruling out church altogether. While people have a favorable view of Jesus many have an unfavorable opinion of the church. It's too rigid on the rules, it's irrelevant to their life, it's judgmental, or it simply does not fit into the new rules of life. Going to church, being involved in a religious community is simply not the rule anymore. People today will admit to being spiritual but not religious and will write their own rules when it comes to belief.

We can hold to our ways so much that we simply begin to rule one another out. To dismiss each other. To go our separate ways.

We are in an anxious and difficult season for the High School senior. By now most have just heard back from the various colleges and universities that they have applied to. They have worked hard to achieve the grades, the experiences, and the connections to help them be accepted into the school of their choice. Yet, despite their efforts, many are ruled out and receive rejection letters.

What is harder are the rejections for the more arbitrary or small rules that we don't measure up to. From early on we learn how to behave, how to dress, and even how we should talk or what we should talk about. Those that deviate from that or just don't fit in can often be ruled out, ignored, not invited or engaged. It's much harder to be rejected for who you are.

By adolescence our youth can often be so careful of everything they do or say that parents often ask..."where did my precocious little girl go, where did my funny little guy disappear to?" The fear of being ruled out by the wrong word, the wrong action, of not belonging to their peer group can be an overwhelming, soul stifling, personality suppressing force. You've got to be cool. Adults aren't immune from this either.

It seems it is so much easier to pick apart, to find reasons to rule someone out, then it is to be confronted with those who may do things differently, or march to the beat of their own drum.

We need our rules and we need our ways but I wonder if we, like the Pharisees and lawyers, become so focused on the way we think things should be done, that we lost sight of the heart of our faith?

Jesus' knows the rules and his version is impossible to keep. We need more than rules. We need more than the law.

If all we have is our rules or our laws then we will always fall short. As Paul so strongly states in Galatians, "The Law condemns us."

Jesus says, "Give what is inside, not just what is outside." Give your heart. Love.

This is so hard to hear and it often takes a prophet to show it to us.

The prophet sat at the table of sinners, those ruled out and rejected. He fed and healed the throngs of people hungry for a word about a God who does not look for reasons to reject them but offers a way to belong. He stopped and talked to the ignored, the unclean, he fully took on their pain and his heart was heavy.

Jesus grieves. He utters the expression woe six times. Six expressions of grief for the ways the ways they had represented God as a petty legalistic tyrant. Jesus says that they have neglected God's heart, God's justice and love.

This Jesus the prophet we are hearing. The former Prophets had all said it before but they were ignored, most of them killed and Jesus exposes them for ones who like their prophets only when they are dead when they pose no risk to our ways.

The Son of God sits at the table with them. The one who fulfills the law, the one who redeems and reconciles. The one who would free us from the condemnation of our rules. The very presence of God. He is with them. Even though they are against him he is there for them. Sadly, they are blinded by an arrogant and prideful opinion of their own rules. They see instead, a dirty handed upstart and insurgent. They see a danger. They see chaos. They see a challenge to everything they have worked to achieve and have clung so tightly to.

They'd rather live by the rules then accept the rule of one who would love so irrationally, so uncontrollably.

We have a culture that pushes a lifestyle and value of success and achievement. We often know what we want from our kids or for our kids. But do we know our kids. How often do we stop and simply listen to them.

Do we ever allow our children to have a prophetic word for us? Do we allow the younger generation to challenge us, even at the risk of insulting us?

When we struggle with those who won't get with the program, maybe we need to look deeper and listen to what they see wrong with the program. Maybe we are the ones missing the point. Maybe they are way ahead of us.

Have you ever asked your kid or a friend, "Do I seem happy, satisfied, joyful about my life?"

They see it if we aren't. They may see it clearer than we see it ourselves. If others see no joy, no passion, no love or justice at the heart of our lives, then others may just have a good reason to rule out our way of life.

When younger generations reject the church. We can choose to be insulted, or we can look at whether we are clutching so tightly to our ways that we are squeezing out the joy, the passion,

and the justice. We may be missing the very presence of Jesus, the work of the Spirit, the will of God.

Generations are rising up and saying no to the old ways. Does God have a word for us in their protests? Is God in this at all? Or are we ruling him out?

Two weeks ago in this series Steve helped us hear Jesus' call to discipleship, to join him at his table and challenged us to be honest about the excuses we make for hesitating. Last week Karin reminded us that God is certainly alive and present, empowering us in and through prayer. Now we are challenged to think about whether we invite Jesus into our lives as long as he fits into our own ways and plays by our rules.

I know I can often be like that 2 ½ year old. Hearing Christ's commands and the spirit's leading but then looking for ways that I can still get what I want, looking for the loopholes, rationalizing the harder teachings that call for sacrifice and surrender. And then my life becomes more about the rules than worshipping the one who I am so blessed to be in the presence of.

Are you imposing your own set of rules on Jesus? He grieves for your whole heart. He is trustworthy and, so much more secure than any of our ways, because the earth shall pass away but God's love endures forever.

Thankfully, God is not dependent upon us. Christ's encounter with the establishment here shows us a God who does not wait for us to move, does not wait for the institutions to act. God acts and moves and is not controlled by anyone. They seek to take him out but God even breaks the rules there. Death will no longer silence the prophet. God's way is uncontainable and unstoppable, challenging and transforming even the things that are used against God. The cross transformed from a tool of death to a symbol of our hope.

If you are able to see beyond the ways and places of how and where you think God works you will see that the amazing things that God is doing.

I see God acting up all over the place in the world. Uncontrollable.

In and outside the church.

In people passionate about finding a better and more sustainable way of living. Consuming less and sharing more.

In people using art and creativity to worship God.

In new communities of Christians sharing what they have, choosing to live in impoverished neighborhoods and reaching out in love.

Let Jesus Rule. God's love and justice is in that.

In the brave who are standing up, making their voice heard, saying no to the ways of greed and oppression.

God's justice is alive and well.

Let Jesus Christ rule.

God will not be stopped. Jesus will not turn back. The Spirit cannot be tamed.

May we have opened eyes and hearts and allow the living Christ to rule our hearts and minds.