

When Two Wrongs Make a Right

Luke 6:1-16

Northminster Presbyterian Church

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It was such a nice sermon, the one that I outlined last week and worked up Friday morning. It was about Sabbath, a sermon perfect for an annual meeting Sunday, a sermon about making time to just be — be with family, be with God — to set aside the rushing and the lists and to find space to just be the beloved of God.

And then Friday afternoon happened. I suppose we should have been suspecting it, though perhaps many of us thought it was just one of those things — you know, where a candidate says they will do one thing to fire up the base but everyone knows that they won't go through with it.

But then Friday afternoon happened. On Friday afternoon, the family we have spent months getting to know and introducing to Chicagoland and America — the family that is thriving despite more than a few challenges — went from being guests in our country to temporary prisoners here. Their provisional green cards make them perfectly legal everywhere in the country now, but if they leave to visit family in Jordan or even to visit relatives in Canada, the current law of the land says they will not be allowed to re-enter.

Yesterday, Hessian Noorian, his wife and their infant child were detained at O'Hare. These parents both work as instructors at Oakton Community College and live in Park Ridge. Their child was born here in the suburbs six months ago and, after much planning and saving, the family had made a trip with all the proper visas in place, to Tehran to show off their little one to proud grandparents and extended family. After a 20-hour journey back that started on Friday, mother and child were cleared by Homeland Security but, because Hessian was born in Iran, though he is a British citizen, he was detained. His wife refused to leave without him. After many hours of detention yesterday and some questioning, the family was allowed entry into the country last night. After actions by attorneys at airports across the nation, 81 of the 109 people with valid visas and green cards, who were detained yesterday, were permitted to enter. But the orders that fence our nation's freedoms in ways not seen in generations remain in effect.

Refugee One, our partner here in Chicagoland in our refugee project, has over a dozen families who have been languishing in refugee camps across the globe, in many cases for two years. Some are scheduled to arrive in Chicago over the next three or four months. Now none of those families will be permitted to come and the court orders of last night do nothing to change that.

In the last 24 hours, people across the nation, and indeed across the world, have been forced to ask ourselves who are we — both as a nation and as individuals. What are our values and how did they bring us to this place? Prayers of lament and frustration and even anger have been offered up by Roman Catholic, Jewish, Presbyterian, Lutheran and other leaders. Religious leaders from the Pope to the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church have reminded us of the Biblical imperative to welcome the stranger and the refugee.

Biblical scholars have posted letters and statements reminding us that our forefathers and foremothers in the faith were refugees more than once — when they went to Egypt in a time of famine and ended up settling there for generations, only to be made slaves, and generations later when they were freed from that slavery and returned to the Promised Land, they were again stateless refugees.

With all of these reminders about our Biblical heritage of respect for and care for and welcome of the stranger and the refugee, and today, with this odd text about Jesus breaking Sabbath laws, it begs the question: What are we to do? How does this particular story from Jesus' ministry help us to live in the changed world in which we find ourselves?

I suppose we have to begin the engagement with this scripture with a bit of context. The celebration of the Sabbath was unknown to the children of Abraham until they were freed from slavery in Egypt. There is no evidence of a day being set aside for worship and rest prior to that time. And the extensive Biblical justifications for the Sabbath celebrations are two-fold: First, in the creation story that became formative for the people in the millennia before Christ, God rested on the seventh day, so humankind should as well. Second, the people who toiled as slaves knew how important a day of rest would be for their own slaves and servants. So from the beginning, Sabbath was about God's example to humanity for a day of rest and worship. Also, it was God's call to the people to remember their humble beginnings and take care of those who were powerless to control their own destinies — remember who you are and where you came from. The Sabbath was a gift then, a gift for God's people and a gift for the servants and laborers of God's people.

But what had that gift become by Jesus' day? We have to remember that Jesus came on the scene about 600 years after another experience of the Hebrew people as refugees. When Babylon conquered Judah in the 6th century BCE and took the gentry and their children into exile in Babylon and when their children and grandchildren returned to the land almost 80 years later, they were again refugees and there was a great social struggle to maintain identity. How would they remain faithful followers of Yahweh? How would they avoid being swallowed up by the other surrounding cultures? It was frightening.

And so they did what frightened people do: the leaders of the Israelites wrote more rules creating ways to tell the real followers of Yahweh from the lukewarm ones. So the gift of the Sabbath became an enforced religious practice with odd rules born of the idea that no one was to work on the Sabbath. You couldn't walk across a cultivated field because that pushed the seeds further into the ground so it was farming. You couldn't pick food off of the vine to eat it because that was work. So lots of preparation had to go into getting ready for the Sabbath.

It wasn't so easy to prepare when you are an itinerate pastor with a band of followers though. So on the day in question here Jesus didn't admonish the disciples when they picked grain from the edge of the field and rubbed it in their hands to clean off the kernels so they could eat them. And then, because Jesus liked to be obvious with his teaching sometimes, he called over the stricken man who, as one who was unclean, had been forced to stay out on the edges of the crowd. And he revealed that he had been healed, even on the Sabbath.

Jesus was reminding the scribes — the ones gathered there to tote up their violations of the Sabbath laws — what the Sabbath was all about in the first place, resting in celebration of the life, and remembering the deliverance they had received from God in the past. It was a gift for them and for the vulnerable.

Why then could they not do what they needed to do — to eat, to stay alive? And why then could he not heal and deliver this man back into full life within the community, even on the Sabbath? If the Sabbath was about life and deliverance — the core values of the Sabbath— then how had his actions violated the spirit of Sabbath laws? His two “wrongs” under the law had left hungry people fed and an isolated suffering man restored to the fullness of life and community. It seems so simple doesn’t it?

But let’s be clear. Jesus isn’t throwing out the law. He’s looking at it through the lens of the law’s own purpose. He’s seeing where they might have gone astray with rules that put a strait jacket around the noble purposes of Sabbath. He was asking them to see that they were taking the giftedness out of the gift God had given them. And perhaps that’s an analysis that helps us as Christians consider where we are right now as a nation.

The sad reality is that ever since 9/11, and even before, we as a nation, and we as Christians living in that nation, have struggled with issues of safety, and foreign threats, and interfaith engagement, and understanding the motivations of those who engage in atrocities in the name of their religion. And we have struggled to balance concepts of hospitality and freedom and welcome and safety. We see that liberty and freedom, including freedom of religion, are the great gifts that inspired our families to come here. But we fear that letting certain others come here will imperil those freedoms. There is nothing immoral about any of that. Safety is not an immoral goal. We Christians bear an additional burden in these conversations because we are called to live out our faith in all aspects of life. And our faith tells us to welcome the stranger and the refugee. It reminds us that our forbearers, and even Jesus and his family, were refugees and strangers in a strange land many times.

Wrestling with these competing noble ideals has never been easy. But in times of fear, we have tended to do what our forefathers did in Israel. We create rules designed for safety that actually imperil freedom and we threaten the existence of our underlying values in the process of trying to preserve them.

We see it in the internment of Japanese and the isolation of Chinese immigrants in World War II and in the laws of the 19th century designed to restrict the freedoms of Irish Catholics and Chinese railway workers. We have a sad legacy of letting fear almost cause us to destroy the gift our nation is in order to save it, just like those rule-obsessed scribes, who went after Jesus on that Sabbath so long ago, seemed to be destroying the gift of the Sabbath.

So, like then, this is a time when we are invited to consider if we have surrendered our underlying values in an effort to preserve those values. If that is where we are, and each of us has to decide that on our own before we can decide that as any kind of community— whether that community is the US, Illinois, Evanston and/or Northminster—then we are invited to look to Jesus as a guide for such a time as this. Jesus invites his brothers and

sisters in the faith not to lose the forest for the trees, not to lose the great gift that God has placed in their hands and in their lives by building so many fences around it that they choke the life and the giftedness right out of it.

Winston Churchill was famous in World War II for a statement he made when asked to slash the funding for the arts and cultural preservation of England in the midst of the Battle of Britain, when their existence as a nation was on the line. His response in refusing to cut that cultural spending was “if I cut it, what are we fighting to save?”

In our quest, our noble quest as a nation, to protect our safety and our children’s safety from the violence of the world, we are, in this time of crisis, called to ask ourselves a similar question as people of faith and as citizens: What values are we preserving if we close our doors to those storm tossed by war and violence and the loss of everything? What faith are we living if we brand people of another faith or people from lands where most people are of another faith as undesirables, untrustworthy because a small minority among them have twisted their values into something ugly and dangerous?

I’m not suggesting the answers are easy. Vulnerability is not something we are comfortable with, but I want to remind us of the gift we have received as a community that has helped welcome strangers into our land. It has given us perspective and a new appreciation of our own blessings. It has given us a broader vision of what the beloved of God look like. That is true of our nation’s immigrant heritage and it is true of our time here at Northminster over the past year.

Today we are reminded that God is always giving us gifts — like Sabbath, like choice, like time, like freedom, like diversity. And we are invited to revel in God’s care for us and to be grateful. We are invited to see and enjoy and take pleasure in all that God has given us. And I believe we are also being called to reassess where our shoulds and have-tos and walls and institutional otherings have gotten in the way of hellos and healings — not just in our religious lives but in our communal and national lives too.

In his day, Jesus confronted the ideas and the people who would build fences around God’s gift of the Sabbath. He was bold in standing up for life and for healing, even if it didn’t come decently and in order. Can we be bold in standing up for our values when others, perhaps with the best of intentions, in our name build fences and divisions among our fellow beloved children of God?

Jesus paid an enormous price for standing up for life and healing— more than we might be called to pay for standing up for our values. But he did it. And, by God’s grace, we can too. May God give us the wisdom and strength to live the life we were born to live, each day, but most particularly for THIS day.