

## **“Rebel with a Cause”**

August 24, 2025

First Christian Church

Text: Luke 13: 10-17

Last week we talked about folks like Noah, Abraham and Sarah, and Moses who trusted God and stepped out in that trust. We talked about people like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abendigo who stepped out in faith, believing God could and would keep God's promises and thereby refusing to follow the laws and habits of occupying invaders. They stood firm before kings and armies, refusing to bow to other god's or lose their identity as God's people. They lived out the laws and traditions of their faith, no matter the cost, because they believed God. The book of Hebrews calls them part of the “great cloud of witnesses” who cheer us on to keep the faith in the midst of challenging situations, to not lose heart or grow weary as we wait upon the Lord. The leader of the synagogue in our reading could be added to that list. Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem had all been taken over by the Roman empire. Judah had a puppet government that was allowed to keep a shred of its identity but both the Temple and its leadership only held a small fraction of its former influence. There really was no Israelite nation to be a part of. So to keep the people of God from simply dissolving into the culture and losing their identity as God's chosen people, local synagogues, usually run by volunteers, taught and held tight to the law of Moses. The law defined them as a people – as God's people. And the center piece of the law was the Sabbath. Commandment number 4, “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.” That is Exodus 20: 8-10. Everyone else in the world worked 7 days a week, but Jews rested on the 7th day and kept it holy. They were cherished for more than just what they could produce. They were God's people. Following the law, keeping the Sabbath – it is what made them who they were.

Jesus joins them in their heroic fight to keep their identity while surrounded by Roman rule, Roman gods, Roman soldiers, and Roman taxes. Jesus was the guest teacher in the synagogue that Sabbath morning, and in the midst of His teaching, He noticed a woman bent over with a spirit that crippled her. Jesus called her over, laid His hands on her, and set her free. Verse 13 says, “immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.” But as the praises went up, the hammer came down. Though lifesaving intervention was permitted on the Sabbath, Judaism was divided on whether healings of non-life-threatening conditions like a withered hand or a spinal disease that had afflicted the woman for years could be healed on the Sabbath. Jesus didn't ignore or negate the Sabbath. He simply sided with the more liberal interpretation that healing even non-life-threatening conditions was allowed on the Sabbath. But the leader of the synagogue was from a more strict branch. He jumped up, accurately quoted the 4th commandment and implored the people not to encourage Jesus in His lawless

activity. Noteworthy moment: When your keeping the rules of the faith puts you at odds with the Son of God, something isn't right. In this case, the rules got in the way of doing the ministry. The rules that helped the people maintain their identity as God's people, actually kept them from acting like God's people. And you don't just need to look like God's people, you need to act like them.

We talked about this a couple weeks ago when we read from the first chapter of the prophet Isaiah. Remember the people were bringing all the right burned offerings at all the right times in worship, but God refused to show up. God had grown tired of their offerings and their assemblies because they failed to "seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; lead for the widow." (Isaiah 1:17) We talked about how the orphan and the widow stood for the most vulnerable in their midst. This week I spent some time reading further into Isaiah, over 50 chapters later in chapter 58, and nothing much had changed. Starting in verse 3, the people ask God,

"Why do we fast, but you do not see?  
Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?"

And God responds:

"Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day  
and oppress all your workers...  
Such fasting as you do today  
will not make your voice heard on high...  
Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice...  
to let the oppressed go free..?  
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, to cover them  
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?  
Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;...  
Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and He will say, "Here I am."

The people are fasting and following all the religious rules that are supposed to shape who they are, but they are not being shaped in a way the cares for the most vulnerable among them: the unborn, the parentless child, the poor, those with physical and emotional challenges, the immigrant, the lost. They are following the rules but not doing ministry.

It reminds me of the story of a couple of the founders of our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In the late 17 and early 18 hundreds, the Holy Spirit was active and bringing revival across the young United States of America. It became known as "the Second

Great Awakening". As part of that, Barton W. Stone and some colleagues organized a revival in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, just north of Lexington. In a time before cars, before good roads, before telephones or mass communication systems, people learned of the revival and came, some traveling weeks to get there. An estimated 20,000 people came to that revival. Without microphones or loudspeakers, dozens of preachers at a time would jump onto a stump and start preaching. The Holy Spirit showed up and grabbed ahold of the people who could be found doing everything from speaking in tongues to singing from the breast to being laid out on the ground, stiff and motionless. The Revival was a huge success and would have continued longer but they simply ran out of food for the people and the animals. There was not a green blade of grass left in the county for a horse to eat. For their efforts, Barton Stone and other revival leaders were charged with violating church disciplines and had their ministerial license and credentials revoked. They did some amazing ministry but broke the rules. Not too far away in western Pennsylvania, a guy named Thomas Campbell had his license and credentials revoked because he broke the rules for the sake of ministry. At the time, western Pennsylvania was the American frontier and ordained ministers only came through a town like Washington, PA about once a month. And when one did, most of the other churches in town brought their folks to the place that had the minister. In that setting, Thomas Campbell had the audacity of offering communion to everyone present, as opposed to just those who were members of his sect of his denomination.

For Campbell, Stone, and Jesus; church rules were getting in the way of ministry. Things designed to maintain the identity of God's people were getting in the way of Jesus healing and the Holy Spirit moving and God's presence being shared.

As a congregation, we have been able to overcome some of those rules that got in the way of people doing ministry. We invite women as well as single and divorced people to share their gifts of spiritual maturity, administrative skills, and leadership in the church as elders, church officers and deacons. Personally, I rejoice in that and can't imagine where we would be without them. And there are other rules we probably need to get past in the name of doing ministry. But at the same time, it is those rules that make us who we are, that hold our identity and keep us from just being good folks who are simply absorbed into the culture. It was the leaders of synagogues just like the one in our story that have kept the people of God a people, whether they had a country to call home or not. We need them. We need those rules.

So where does that leave us? It leaves us standing with Jesus, who was teaching about who God is and who we are, and in the process saw a person who needed help. And in order to show who God is and who we are, He reached out and helped that person – freed them from what kept them captive, kept them small, kept them from being who God calls them to be. That is where we are. Following God's rules like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abendigo; even when those rule make us stand apart, be different, and make people laugh like they did at

Noah. But also breaking the Bible's rules like Jesus for the sake of ministry, reaching out and helping the most vulnerable. Being the ones who make verse 13 happen: "Immediately she stood up straight and began praising God." And verse 19 happen, "and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by Jesus." Anytime someone moves from looking down, unable to look up, bent and burdened from the weight of sin, expectations, failure, disease, judgement, stereotypes, and history; who then receives the gift of forgiveness, acceptance, love and healing; and then stands up, rises up, lifting their hands and lifting their souls in praise; it is a time for all God's people to rejoice.

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