



When Jesus Break the Rules

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost
1 September 2024

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Chris

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

At every church I have served, I have found that the first months have been about listening and paying attention to the life, the stories, the practices of the church. Do we stand or kneel for communion? Who keeps the church kitchen organized? Who pays who to get the good wine at communion? At my first church, I found out that if I wanted to make any changes to the rules in the worship practice of the church I could ask the senior pastor, but really I needed to see how malleable the pastor's wife, who was in charge of the altar guild, was to the idea? At Trinity in CA, we were just breaking ground on a new sanctuary. I was tasked with getting the high school students together to clean out a large warehouse shed building so it could be torn down to make way for the new building. I have no idea how long the shed had been there – but getting students and adults to agree on what should be thrown out was a challenge. In Idaho, the church had 8 classrooms, one was set aside for the quilters and the rule was you did not mess with the quilters room – but three of them were filled with old garage sale items that never sold but were saved to be put out the next year. I think those classrooms lasted four weeks before we rented a huge dumpster and I invited people to show up on a Saturday to clean them out. To make way for ministry. Here at Ascension, the attic was full and one classroom had been filled with old children's ministry stuff – like years and years of children's ministry stuff. In my first months I took to organizing and doing some cleaning and filled the recycling bin with outdated, yellowed posters and other long overlooked ministry supplies. I thought everything was fine, until I received a text from a member with a picture. He had taken a picture of the recycling bin with a poster of the ten commandments sticking out of the top. His text message read, "After seeing this, I look forward to your sermon on Sunday." So close to the win – so close.

The Pharisees and religion scholars asked, "Why do your disciples brush off the rules, showing up at meals without washing their hands?" Jesus answered, "Isaiah was right about frauds like you, hit the bull's-eye in fact: These people make a big show of saying the right thing, but their heart isn't in it. They act like they are worshiping me, but they don't mean it. They just use me as a cover for teaching whatever suits their fancy, ditching God's command and taking up the latest fads."

Well, if ever there was a Scripture reading that sums up my life – this is it. I love the story of Jesus. The way he reaches out to the hurting, the broken, the sick, the lost, the dying. Every single story tells another story. The wedding at Cana begins with celebration – Jesus shows up only to hear his mother tell him, "They have no more wine." Jesus changes water into wine – breaking the rules of science. Jesus meets a woman at a well – tells her the story of her life – promises her living water – breaks the rules about talking with women alone. Jesus heals a paralyzed man at a pool, simply by asking him, "do you want to be made well?" Breaking the rules of medicine. Jesus tells the story of the second son, who demands his inheritance early, squanders everything with wild living, returns home to confess, "Father, I am no longer worthy to be called your son." Only his father has prayed for this moment and will not let his son finish his confession, before he is ordering a celebration to be prepared. Jesus eats at the home of a tax collector named Matthew. Breaking the rules of who you could eat with. Jesus raises his friend Lazarus from the dead. Breaking the rules between life and death. Jesus heals a man on the sabbath, breaking the rules of the religious leaders. And finally, Jesus dies on the cross and rises from the dead, breaking the rules of the power of death. This reading could be my theme song.

It seems that every time Jesus shows up, he breaks the rules. He questions the "what has been" and the "what is" to invite us into the "what will be."

It is no secret; I struggle with the rules at times – especially in the church world. My favorites are the man-made rules that make no sense but that are still in place because those in authority (and I use big air quotes here) just have not figured out how to move forward or simply do not want to move us forward. We follow a Savior who breaks rules left and right in his ministry. And in the church, we celebrate most of those broken rules. Working on the Sabbath. Guilty. Women proclaiming the resurrection. Guilty. Inviting all people into the body of Christ. Guilty.

And yet, there are still some rules we cannot figure out how to break "as a church." So individual pastors figure it out instead. Here at Ascension, we break a few rules because they simply do not make sense with the theology we hold as important to our faith and life. We proclaim the "priesthood of all believers" but our denomination still forbids anyone but



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a pastor to stand at the altar and bless the bread and wine with the words from 2nd Corinthians: “in the night in which he was betrayed.” Our pastoral assistants have been providing communion to countless homebound members for years – tell me please what is the difference when I say the words instead of the pastoral assistant? This is by far my favorite rule to break. For some years now, I have contemplated figuring out the approach to having a high school student actually stand at the altar during the closing worship of the youth gathering in front of thousands of other high school students and speak the words over the bread and wine. What message does that make to the young people of our church that they are just as important as any pastor, deacon, bishop, or presiding bishop in the eyes of God? But can you imagine the hand-wringing and chastisement that would follow? I mean, I could be excommunicated (I think Lutherans still do that) for making that happen. Why exactly?

What is so scary about giving up the man-made authority given to me and handing it off to another who tends the moment with the same reverence and faithfulness that I bring to such a moment?

We do it all the time. For a few dollars, you too can become an ordained minister in just minutes through the Universal Life Church (whatever that is) on the internet. Now you can perform the marriage for your niece or your grandson or best friend. Surely signing the marriage license is more important than the one who stands at the altar to bless bread and wine. Maybe not.

And nothing is more backwards to me than watching a denomination spin its wheels to create and vote to approve social statements on all kinds of concerns in our world so that the world will know what we stand for. Good God, does the world even care? Most of the members of our denomination have no idea we even have social statements. And if our members do know we have social statements, just so you know, it’s okay if you don’t agree with them. Welcome to being a Lutheran Christian in the world today.

Lutherans have been breaking the rules for centuries. Bible in your own language. You bet. Pray to Jesus directly without going through a saint or the mother of Jesus. Of course. Pastors getting married. Yes. Thank God. Receiving both bread and wine at communion. Drink up my friends. Good works. Yes – because of what God has done not because even one of your good works will get you into haven. Hallelujah! Letting little children come to the altar to receive the real presence of Jesus in bread and wine. Please. They may not know exactly how Jesus is present, but they know what it feels like to be excluded. And last time I watched Jesus, no one is left out – especially the little children.

My friends, it has never been about washing hands before you eat. Our relationship with God has never been about what foods we eat. Our relationship with God has been, is today, and always will be about what Jesus has done for us – teaching us how to treat our neighbor, dying on a cross for our sins, rising from the dead to share with the us the promise of eternal life, preparing a place for us.

What does our teacher, our friend, our Master and Savior tell us?

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Jesus says. “You believe in God; believe also in me. ² My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. ⁴ You know the way to the place where I am going.” ⁵ Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, how can we know the way?” ⁶ Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Perhaps that is the only rule we will ever have need to remember. Thanks be to God. Amen.