

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." ¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. Luke 13:10-17 NRSV

Rules and Regulations: Are they a bane or a blessing? In some cases the lack of rules aren't helpful. Some years ago, at great expense a new football league was put together which trumpeted a "looser" set of rules and the owners claimed it would add to the excitement. Interestingly enough, it never developed a following, and lack of rules made it look more inept rather than "exciting". However there are rules that we are glad are in place. When I go into a washroom at a restaurant, I am very glad to see the rule posted saying that "all restaurant workers will wash their hands. I, as well as others I suspect am grateful for such rules!

Then there are rules that are put in place that at one time perhaps (I say PERHAPS) had value but don't now. For example here New Jersey there is a rule on the books that says it is against the law to wear a bullets proof vest while committing at murder. Consider also the law in Connecticut that says a pickle is not a pickle unless it bounces! A good rule, in fact the 3rd Commandment, declares that we should remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Since this was originally delivered to the people of Israel by Moses it was a cornerstone of their relationship with God. The original intent of the commandment was for all to stop working and put the day over to God. So important was keeping this commandment that there was an expression that went something like this:

"As Israel kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept Israel"

As time went on the sad truth was that Israel did not keep the Sabbath. You can find many prophets speaking against some of the full blown activity violating this commandment. Eventually Israel went into exile, and when the people returned to their homeland, one of the real topics for concern was to keep the Sabbath free from being violated by doing any unnecessary "work"

Eventually the obsession of what was permitted and not permitted seemed to get out of control. We see the fruits of this kind of thinking in the gospel lesson for August 25. A woman who probably had a curvature of the spine, as well an arthritic condition is in the crowd at the synagogue where Jesus is teaching. Her plight is so obvious and Jesus not only takes notice of her, he heals her. You would think, this would be a wonderful thing especially because the woman suffered for so long (18 years). Not according to the ruler of the synagogue, who obviously is obsessed with not violating the Sabbath. Jesus then calls out those who are siding with the ruler, pointing out that if you take care of an animal on the Sabbath, why not a heal a daughter of Abraham on the Sabbath ? They are caught "flat-footed" with his response to the point of embarrassment. Funny how it ends up that people who aren't religious experts in the story get it and they do the obvious thing; praise God!

While we might be tempted to look at this story and shake our head saying to ourselves that we would never do that, I'll bet all of us could come up with at least one rule in our faith journeys, which in reflection didn't make any sense and was more harmful than helpful.

Perhaps a rephrasing of the famous serenity prayer would be a helpful guide to us:

O God Help us to keep the rules that show your love, and let go of the ones that don't, with the wisdom to know the difference.

Pr, John Van Haneghan