

Transfiguration
Dallas, Texas

Isaiah 58:9b-14

Psalm 103:1-8

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

Not long ago I came across a proverb that I have come to love: those who dance are considered mad by those who can't hear the music.¹ The longer I've sat with this proverb, the more I think it captures the story of the gospel, and the way people responded to the mission and witness of Jesus. Jesus' life was almost like a dance, as he moved from place to place bringing life and joy and peace, and he spent much of his time inviting others into that dance with him, but not everyone could hear the music to which he danced, and so, to them, he seemed a madman, a lunatic, someone to be shut up and snuffed out.

That's essentially what is happening in the story we heard today, isn't it? In it, Jesus visits a synagogue on the Sabbath and heals a woman crippled for 18 years. It's a moment much like so many in the gospels, in which Jesus shows his compassion for the least and the lost and transforms their lives. But to go back to the proverb, if Jesus and the woman are dancing, not everyone hears the music. The local religious leader speaks right up, and it's certainly not to add to all the feel-good. Instead, he chastises the woman for seeking healing on the Sabbath, and then he launches into a diatribe about the rules. "You can't just go getting healed any old time you want! There are rules about these things. *You must follow the rules.*"

He is part of what I think of as the "Law and Order Police," the sort who are always ready to tell other people they have done something wrong. They know the rules, and they make sure other people know that they know the rules, too. Typically, people devoted to law and order above all else view any broken rule as a slippery slope to total lawlessness and the erosion of safety and order. They are afraid that, without the firm boundaries of a strict rule of law, the world will spiral into anarchy and chaos. But fear is not the way God wants us to be oriented toward the world, as evidenced by the way the Bible contains the phrase "do not be afraid" nearly 150 times. And what's more, as Jesus reveals by his rebuke of the religious leader in today's story, an obsessive devotion to law and order can easily blind us to our responsibility to address the suffering of our fellow human beings. "The sabbath was made for people," Jesus says elsewhere in the gospels (Mark 2:27), "not people for the sabbath."

In my observation, a great many of our brothers and sisters in Christ today seem to have more in common with the synagogue leader than with Jesus. Their primary

¹ <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/06/05/dance-insane/>

allegiance is to law and order, and they loudly oppose efforts to help even the most desperate people in our world if it would threaten the sanctity of “the rules.” They brandish justice as a bludgeon to keep people in line and orderly, even when the result is the unnecessary extension of suffering. Yet, the Jesus we encounter in the gospels was undeterred by legalism when faced with suffering, and he reserved some of his harshest words for those who were more loyal to the rules than to their fellow human beings. Jesus always knows when our claims of religious fervor are really just a mask for grabbing power and keeping people in line.

Perhaps the synagogue leader was doing what he had always been taught, and is more ignorant than evil. But power mixed with religious certainty becomes dangerous when it is used to control the lives of others. It’s like Barbara Brown Taylor once wrote,

“Jesus was not brought down by atheism and anarchy. He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix. Beware those who claim to know the mind of God and are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform. Beware those who cannot tell God’s will from their own.”²

If our Christian faith is not expanding our capacity for empathy and mercy, it may mean we need to revisit the gospels and reread the stories of our Lord. Faith in Jesus should inspire us to follow his example, to seek out the people others are overlooking and figure out how we can help them. And when we find ourselves in complicated positions with seemingly competing principles tugging at us – if, for example, we are faced with situations in which strict adherence to the law seems to exclude our ability to help a suffering person – the way of Jesus always prioritizes compassion over rule-following. Not that we get to just make up our own rules whenever we want simply by declaring our actions as religiously motivated – that’s how our country has wound up with all sorts of discrimination veiled as religious liberty – but we will almost always behave rightly if we remain oriented toward the one who broke the rules for the sake of love.

Jesus sides with mercy. Always. He never once says, you don’t deserve to be healed because you didn’t follow the rules. You don’t deserve to be fed or clothed or treated with dignity because you didn’t submit the right form. He is perpetually merciful. It is who he is. It is the music he dances to even when those around him can’t hear it. It’s the music he wove into the fabric of creation, the background noise of the cosmos, you could say, and to which he is always inviting us to listen and dance, too.

My friends, if we listened harder for that music, we would dance with Jesus more often. That is gospel truth. And not only would it orient our lives more to the merciful example of Jesus, but it would also help us lean into that example in the face of a dysfunctional dynamic that has long afflicted human societies. I call the

² <https://www.religion-online.org/article/the-perfect-mirror-jn-181-1937/>

“either/or” syndrome. It’s on display in the gospel story, when the religious leader wants to paint the situation as though there are only two options available for faithful people to choose from – you either strictly observe the rules of the Sabbath, which would preclude you from helping anyone, or else you are choosing to reject the Law of God entirely. Either/or, as though there are no other possibilities available to a faithful person in such a situation.

This either/or syndrome is so rampant today, that it threatens to incapacitate us. Far too many situations are framed as though they are simply the choice between two competing and mutually exclusive options. Every crisis, every issue is described by popular culture and media as though it is a contest between two opposing points of view. There is almost never any in-between or nuance, never any options outside those two poles; always just either this or that.

So, with immigration, you must either support the construction of a huge wall and the arrest and deportation of all people who are in our country without authorization, regardless of circumstance, or else you must support open borders and the elimination of immigration laws entirely. That’s the choice. Giant walls or a borderless society. It’s the same with gun control: you either support the unfettered availability of anyone in our country to own any kind of firearm without any kind of background check or training, or else it must mean that you support the immediate confiscation of all weapons of any kind or for any purpose. The list of issues crippled by the “either/or syndrome” goes on and on: abortion, reparations, conservation, health care. They’re all posed to us as though they are simply debates between two positions. We are either for one, or the other, and we must choose.

But the more we read the gospels, the more obvious it is that “either/or” thinking is not Kingdom-thinking, because Jesus is the master of the third way. People want to hem him in and make him choose between two options. Observe the Sabbath or not; pay taxes to Caesar or not; condemn this woman caught in adultery or not. But Jesus’ imagination is always big enough to realize that these dichotomies are not just overly simplistic, they’re toxic and destructive. Which means we should be suspicious anytime someone wants to boil down our possible responses to a complicated problem to two opposing and usually inadequate choices.

If we want to dance to the music of Jesus, we should seek to emulate not only his mercy, but also his wisdom in knowing how to practice that mercy in a world that is gripped by obsessive legalism and idolatrous partisanship. Because those who dance to the music of Jesus believe in the possibilities that live outside of false dichotomies. So even if others around us can’t hear the music, even if they call us crazy or naïve or foolish, let’s keep listening for that music and let’s keep dancing with Jesus.