

“Rule of Law”

Sermon – August 24, 2025 Stone Presbyterian Church

The rule of law. It is a fundamental governance principle where all individuals and institutions, including the government, are accountable to laws that are public, equally enforced, and applied impartially.

Well, ideally. But as 19th century French novelist, Honore de Balzac noted, “The law is a spider web, in which the small flies get caught and the big ones break through.”

Or as late 19th century French poet Anatole France wrote,

"The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor from sleeping under bridges, begging in the streets, and stealing bread."

Yet having no laws would be chaos. We need laws to protect our general safety and rights. The problem is when the “rule of law” becomes the “law for rule.”

After Reconstruction after the Civil War, the South developed what were known as Jim Crow laws whose purpose was to enforce racial segregation and white supremacy to the extreme. And was codified by the Supreme Court's "separate but equal" ruling in Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, but dismantled by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Hard to believe that was 60 years ago.

The 1960s were, as many of you know personally, were a turbulent time in America. In 1968, Richard Nixon successfully used the phrase “Law and Order” to appeal to voters concerned about the racial unrest, Vietnam War protests, and the perceived breakdown of social order, promising to restore stability. Nixon won the presidency with results not too dissimilar to the 2024 election.

The problem with “law and order” is whose laws for what order?

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Most weeks I watch a video commentary on the gospel lesson by biblical storytellers Tom and Amelia Boomershine in Dayton, Ohio.

After hearing, discussing, and interpreting the lectionary passage, Amelia, as the moderator, always asks Tom, “what is the connection between today’s passage and ministries of peace and justice?” What a wonderful lens through which to view the bible.

That should be the goal of “law and order” or better yet the foundation. The goal of law should be justice and the goal of order should be peace.

Instead of “law and order”, imagine a politician running on a platform of “justice and peace”!

Though in biblical times it was monarchies and empires, the same issues arose. And it’s been an issue in religion from then through today.

In today’s gospel lesson from Luke 13 we find Jesus teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath, which he seemed to frequently do.

Just then a disabled woman hunched over for 18 years appears. By now you can already guess that he’s going to heal this woman, get in trouble because he did it on the Sabbath, but win out in the end.

But just like politics even today, we sometimes forget the human element.

We hear these miracle stories so often that we sometimes gloss over the details.

First, Jesus sees her. “Being seen” in the 21st century has come to mean feeling acknowledged and understood by others, not just physically, but also emotionally and intellectually. But people felt they were “being seen” in the 1st century by Jesus. Jesus saw each person for who they were.

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He sees her crippling pain of almost two decades. He sees her pain of being judged by others that she must have sinned in some fashion to deserve this. He sees her faith for still coming to the synagogue, the community center. He sees her invisibility for being a woman.

Then he calls her over. Jesus—a man—calls over her—a woman, a disabled one at that—into the synagogue where only men are. Jesus doesn’t care about social conventions for their own sake. He sees and calls her over as a fellow human being in need.

Later in verse 16 he will call her “a daughter of Abraham”. In the whole of the New Testament, she is the only woman who gets this title. This name stresses the woman's membership in the covenant community. Jesus does call Zacchaeus, redeemed tax collector, a “son of Abraham” in Luke 19:9. It is curious that Jesus gives sacred titles to two religious outsiders.

Jesus then speaks to the woman—and in public—again not kosher. Women are neither to be seen nor heard. He tells her simply she is now free of her ailment, and lays his hands on her. Sight, sound, and touch.

She immediately is healed, stands up, and praises God. Hallalujah!

But, of course, we have the leader of the synagogue telling the crowd essentially, “Today’s the Sabbath, the day of no work. Come back any other time.” Interestingly, he says this to the people, **not** to Jesus directly. You get the sense the leader knows about Jesus and his healing and is as irked with the people as much as he is Jesus. They should know better as good law-observant Jews. Just wait a day.

The commandment forbidding work on the Sabbath comes out of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy with restatements of the

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commandments. In all cases, they simply say on the Sabbath “do no work”, but leave “work” undefined, allowing for various interpretations from ancient times to today.

In Jesus' day there were ongoing discussions among the rabbis and among teachers of the law about what were weightier and lighter dimensions of the law. When you have 613 laws, they can't all be equal. The rabbis agreed that lifesaving intervention was permitted on the Sabbath, but were divided on healings of non-life-threatening conditions.

Jesus is accusing and criticizing the synagogue leader because he is making something that is a lighter dimension of the law into something that is a weightier dimension. And Jesus is setting this healing of the woman as a weightier matter of the law.

To do so, Jesus draws directly from the version of the commandment in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 that connects Sabbath rest not to the Creation story and God resting on the seventh day but to Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt.

In Jesus' view, since the Sabbath law commemorates and celebrates Israel's liberation, it ought to be a day for enacting — not inhibiting — the present-day liberation of Israelites.

Hence, Jesus is liberating the woman from the bondage of her crippling disability that she has had for 18 years! Jesus is not criticizing the observance of the law; he is criticizing the “law and order” versus “justice and peace.” If people can take care of their animals on the Sabbath, then surely Jesus can take care of “a daughter of Abraham.”

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In none of this does Jesus abolish the Sabbath commandment. Rather he aims to follow it faithfully.

Fundamentally, it comes down to mercy, having compassion on those in need, particularly at the margins of society.

For Luke, mercy is at the heart of what God is doing in Jesus. Going back during Mary’s pregnancy in Luke 2, the theme of divine mercy is featured prominently in Mary’s and Zechariah’s songs.

And at Jesus dedication in the temple as an infant, Simeon says Jesus will be the “light for revelation” to the people, but that he will also be opposed.

Funny how doing good, being merciful, standing up for the downtrodden gets some people so upset that they fight against it.

As a good rabbi, Jesus argued his point from the rule of law but anchored it in mercy. Jesus’ mission was not to come and just save our souls. He came to heal the whole person, body, mind, and spirit together in this life for the next.

And that meant doing, not just saying. Note in this story as well as most of the stories where it said “Jesus was teaching in the synagogue” that we do not hear what Jesus was actually teaching!

And in this story, like some others, neither is there any mention of “faith” on behalf of the recipient; *Jesus* initiates the action.

So, what did Jesus actually “teach” in today’s story? 1) that words without action do not serve God, 2) that we should see all people, particularly those at the margins of society, as children of God and seek to heal those in need in body as well as spirit, and 3) that doing so is

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following the law because it is an act of loving your neighbor, which outweighs other laws because it shows our love of God.

So whatever secular laws our society creates or selectively enforces to exclude or oppress others, as followers of Christ we seek justice and peace even if we are opposed. And that’s not our rule; that is law of God.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.
Amen.