

Rulers and Playing by the Rules: 2 Samuel 6 and Mark 6:14 – 29

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Have you ever broken the rules? Of course you have, we all have.

One memorable broken rule for me happened in Utah, in Salt Lake City. We noticed on our very first day there that charitable services for those in unfortunate circumstances were very visible, as were the people in some of those circumstances. They were friendly and helpful to us newcomers, and didn't ask for anything – in fact, there were red parking meters scattered throughout the area that informed us that begging was against the law and not to give to street people, but that, if we wanted to help, we could put coins in these special meters to help support the city's outreach services. Of course we did that – how could we not? Plus, it lightened the heavy load of coins one acquires when traveling!

But I broke that rule. On our way to dinner, there was a man sitting in a wheelchair on a sunny street corner with a can and a sign that said he was a disabled veteran – please help. Then I noticed – he was reading! He had a battered, tattered book with many pages lying open on his lap. I'm a librarian – he was reading – I had to give him something! I put a dollar in his can, then asked, "What are you reading?"

I wish I could remember the title of the book, but it was his favorite, it was a war novel, and also had been a favorite of his father – who was also a veteran, a Vietnam vet - we chatted about books and reading for a bit, and I had a glimpse of what his life was like. He had a place to stay, but not much space and not many possessions. His books were important to him. He was an avid reader who read whatever he could get his hands on, including, he confessed, the Baby Sitters Club series for kids.

I wanted so much to go buy a book for him and look for him again, but unfortunately, we didn't return to that part of the city. My meager dollar gave me such an unexpected return – I can still see us chatting on that sunny street corner, his blue eyes lighting up as he talked about the book he was reading. I still wish I had done more, yet I carry this story in my heart and whenever I remember it, I pray for that man and for all of our veterans. It's so true that we don't do enough for them.

So breaking rules isn't always a bad thing, is it? There are times when breaking rules is the right thing to do, when keeping the rules is questionable – even unethical – and today we are 'blessed' with a complicated set of readings from Scripture that involve breaking or keeping rules. But the beauty of using a lectionary is that it forces us to look at more than just the familiar passages of Scripture. It forces us to wrestle with readings that, often, are strange, and sometimes the pairing of Old and New Testament readings is even stranger.

I was taught in the School for Deacons that a clue to the focus of the lectionary readings could be found in the Collect for the day. Today in the Collect, we are asking God to help us know and understand what things we ought to do and have the grace and

power to accomplish them. That's a very odd request to pair with readings that include the naked dancing of King David and beheading of John the Baptist!

Let's see what we can do with this.

In 2 Samuel, we encounter the story of King David bringing the Ark of the Covenant from its place in the house of Abinidab, where it has been hidden and forgotten these many years, to a place of honor in David's city, Jerusalem. There is feasting, there is dancing, everything is wonderful – except it's not. If you look at the verse numbers for that reading today, you will see that parts have been left out. A lot of parts. There's a big clue in the text, too: You may have noticed in the first paragraph, the ark is brought out of the house of Abinadab, and in the second it is brought out of the house of Obed-Edom. Here's the whole story (or as much of it as I can fit in one sermon):

David has finally become king after waiting 20 years and it's time to restore the Ark of God, the Ark of the Covenant between God and God's people led by King David, to a place of honor and reverence as it was in times past. The Old Testament Book of Numbers includes all kinds of rules about how the ark was to be built, how it was to be respected, who could see it, who could touch it, and so on. The family of Abinadab has cared for it all these years, and now it's time to bring it to the City of David, so Abinadab and his sons are honored to provide this one last service in caring for the ark.

They load it onto a brand new cart, an honor in itself in those days before manufacturing, and drive the oxen that pull it over the roads on their journey, with AH-heeyo) Ahio walking before the cart to clear the way and (oo-ZAH!) Uzzah walking beside it to drive the oxen and keep the cart steady.

David has gathered the 30,000 men of Israel to make this journey with the ark, and they are dancing and singing and playing harps and lyres and tambourines and castanets and cymbals as they proceed. It's a parade!

Now here is the first part that's left out: Something happens – the oxen stumble, the cart shakes, the ark, the Holy Ark, is in danger of falling, so Uzzah, who has cared for it these many years, reaches out to steady it. He touches it. The Book of Numbers is clear in its instruction that only a priest may touch the Ark of the Covenant. And so, for that act of "irreverence" – Uzzah is struck dead by the Lord. WHAT??? He was protecting it. Would it be better to just let it fall on the dust of the road, and possibly break open? How reverent would that be???

Oh, but the problem goes further back than that – the error in judgment wasn't merely touching the holy ark, it was using the cart in the first place, and regardless of who made that decision – can we assume it was David, for he knew the rules? – Uzzah bears the responsibility. There are rules, after all – no one shall touch the ark except a great high priest. It is to be carried on poles held by members of the Tribe of Levi. David goofed, and a man paid the price with his life.

No wonder people don't want to come to church! For some reason, this is the God they remember, the angry, judgmental God who selfishly kills off people on a whim, who lashes out at innocent people who are just doing their jobs!

The sad thing is, this is the only God some people know. At least, this is what I've encountered when I have visited in hospitals: God is angry at me, and so I am ill. I wasn't good enough, I didn't follow the rules and now this. There is no hope, for God isn't answering my prayers and making me well.

Wow. That's so sad. That is not the God that I worship. That is not the God that the Episcopal Church follows. That is not the God that Jesus taught us about; in fact, that image of God is the very reason Jesus came – to teach us that this is not God, that God is love, that God is about mercy more than judgment. So why would passages like this be in the Bible?

Remember that the Bible is a collection of books, of stories that reveal to us different aspects of God. These stories show us God in relationship with people, and in 2 Samuel, the stories are showing us God's relationship with his chosen king, David.

And look at David's response, which was also NOT in today's reading: David showed his strength of character: He was angry at the Lord for wiping out Uzzah, and he refused to carry the ark into Jerusalem. WHAT??? He refused God??? How dare anyone refuse God???

But look again: Yes, David knew the rules, and yes, he broke them, but he thought that God was unjust to take the life of Uzzah, and so he brings the ark to the house of Obed-Edom (now we've finally gotten to that second paragraph in today's reading). Obed-Edom was a poor man, but when the ark was brought to his house, he cared for it for three months. He and his family were blessed and their circumstances improved.

And David made his peace with God, as one does in a healthy relationship, and brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem with feasting and dancing, and his kingdom was established. End of story? No way!

There's the part about Michal. She was King Saul's daughter, and what we don't know here, because it appears before and after this section, is that Michal is David's wife. She loved him; with her brother Jonathan, she protected him from her father's plots to kill him, and now she watches from her window and sees him dancing so vigorously that he reveals more than not. The part that is left out here happens after David arrives at his palace – it happens in the next part of the reading, when Michal approaches him and expresses her displeasure: there were young servant girls present who saw his dancing – and everything else - and she is not pleased.

What isn't clear in the scripture readings is exactly why she wasn't pleased, for Michal was one of several wives of King David and then she had been given to another man to be his wife for many years before she was pulled from that relationship and traded back to David again for political reasons. So much for Biblical marriage!

In the end, it seems David had little to do with her after this point, because the scripture tells us that she remained childless to the end of her days. You can read between the lines there.

It's interesting to look at the parts that are left out of any particular reading to see what they reveal.

In the New Testament reading today, what's left out is Jesus himself. Word is spreading about the amazing teaching and healing that is happening wherever Jesus goes, but our passage from Mark Chapter 6 opens with King Herod. He has heard about the things Jesus is doing. People are asking, "Who IS he?" and Herod is convinced that Jesus is John the Baptist risen from the dead.

Mark then proceeds to tell us how Herod had John arrested and imprisoned, and how his wife, Herodias, held a grudge against John and wanted him killed because John dared to criticize her marriage to Herod, but Herod protected John because he was afraid of him. He had listened to John's teachings and he liked listening to them but didn't understand them. Yet recognized that John was a holy man from God.

In truth, the marriage of Herod and Herodias is much more complicated than it appears. This particular Herod is Herod Antipas, whose father, Herod the Great, had five wives and had four sons named Herod by three of these wives.

Herodias was the *niece* of Herod Antipas, *daughter* of his brother Herod, and when they first met, she was the *wife* of her *uncle*, yet another one of Herod Antipas's brothers, also named Herod – Herod Philip, with whom she had her daughter Salome. In order to marry one another, Herodias had to abandon her husband Herod Philip while Herod Antipas had to divorce *his* wife, who was a daughter of the powerful King of the Nabateans.

So John's criticism of their marriage was not quite as simple as is stated in our gospel reading: "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." There was a lot left out there, but the bottom line is that Herodias was technically still married to Herod Philip. And speaking of rules, a woman marrying her uncle is a relationship that wouldn't be allowed in our own place and time.

Herodias gets her way in the end when her daughter Salome – who, remember is both Herod's niece and grandniece as well as his stepdaughter - and yes, her name is Salome, not Herodias as written in the translation used in today's gospel. Most translations read "the daughter of Herodias" but for some reason the NRSV left out the daughter part. Nevertheless, it's her daughter Salome who dances for Herod and his important guests at his birthday party and is rewarded with the granting of a wish. Salome shows some political savvy when she goes to ask her mother what she should request, and apparently doesn't balk at the thought of asking for John's head. That's thoroughly disgusting, but if you've ever watched the HBO series "Rome" you may agree that it's pretty typical of that time period. This is the world Jesus lived in.

And Herod was deeply grieved by this request – it’s tragic that, instead of drawing on his authority and power as a king, he was afraid to protest – afraid to lose face in front of his important guests by refusing this horrible request, and John pays the tragic price.

How different yet how alike these two stories are! In the end, these stories are a comparison of two kings. We have in one a King who makes mistakes but because he is in a relationship with God is not afraid to speak his mind to God. He is a king who cares for his people, dancing with them and feeding them, and he is a king who is not afraid to disagree with his wife, even if, sadly, he never makes peace with her or resolves the situation.

And we have in the other story another king who makes mistakes, but because he doesn’t understand God’s teachings and is not in a relationship with God, is afraid to speak his mind and break the oath he made in the presence of his guests – what will they think? - a king who lives in fear of the opinions of others and needs to save face, a king who is afraid to speak up to his wife and say, “No! This is wrong! I won’t do this and you can’t trick me into it!”

And then we have Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God – but wait, that part was left out! That’s the part that King Herod was hearing when he answered the question, “Who is he?” That’s the part that was left out of *today’s* lectionary reading but we’ve been hearing it in recent weeks, and we are about to hear more: Tune in next week, same time, same station, to learn about the kingdom of God and how Jesus feeds 5,000 people!

As our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry says, when reading scripture we should read the lines and also read between the lines – literally and figuratively. Maybe we should do that when we “read” people, too.

When you encounter people as you travel your life’s journey – do you read them? Do you read the lines – what you see and hear – and read between the lines? Do you go beyond the labels of friend, stranger, job description, homeless person, immigrant - and wonder who they are as individuals and how they got to be here and now? Everyone has a story. When you encounter people, read between the lines and ask yourself Herod’s question, “Who is he?”

In the kingdom of God, we are called to see people as God sees them, as Jesus sees them – not as a scruffy bearded man who sleeps under a bridge but as a man who is so desolate of hope that he cannot face people and would rather go hungry than visit a soup kitchen. What is his story? How did he get there?

I found out one day from a man working at a soup kitchen. He had been that man, living under a bridge, so desolate and hopeless because his wife left him. He was so desolate that he couldn’t function, and lost his job and eventually ended up under a bridge over the Raritan River, and he wasn’t alone. He wasn’t the only person living there.

Jesus saved him. It didn't happen because he suddenly saw the light – it didn't happen because someone preached the Bible to him and showed him all his sins.

It happened because a local rabbi brought sandwiches to those hungry people who lived under the bridge. It happened because someone gave him a sandwich when he was hungry. It happened because someone – someone like that rabbi - cared enough to listen to his story. It happened because someone cared enough to keep trying.

That man told me his story as we were working at the soup kitchen and waiting for the guests to arrive for the evening meal. I don't know why he told me his story that day, but I carry it in my heart, just as I now carry the story of my encounter with the disabled vet who loves to read. Some of you have heard these stories before – and I will tell them again and again and again because THIS is what the Kingdom of God is like. This is it!

It's seeing people as whole creations of God's love not with dismissive labels like beggar, mentally ill, immigrant, poor, or any kind of "other." Seeing people as whole creations means listening to their stories when you can, and sharing God's mercy not judgment. It's sharing stories of a loving God, *not* a judgmental one. It's letting people know that WE know God in a different way. It's letting people know *not* that their sins will bring them to Hell, but that the Good News that Jesus preached, the news that turned the 1st century world around, the Good News that has the potential to spin our own world upside down in the 21st century is that God is about Love and Mercy, not Judgment. People don't get that, they haven't heard that.

YOU'VE heard it because you come here, but the people who gave up on church because of all those stories about judgment and exclusion don't understand what we're all about, what God's message really is. They don't understand that the Good News isn't "Repent and you will be saved" but that "God loves you all the time, no matter how many mistakes you make. God will always love you and will always take you back. We will never be good enough and we don't have to be." That's the Good News. That's what the Kingdom of God is about. It's about loving first. It's about feeding first. It's about David, blessing the people and distributing food to all the people, giving to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and cake of raisins and not counting the cost or measuring whether they are deserving or not. It's about a rabbi bringing sandwiches to people who live under a bridge. It's about feeding the mind and the soul *after* feeding the body because that's what happens in the Kingdom of God.

Someday, I will go back to Salt Lake City, and when I do, I will carry a book with me at all times, just in case I see my veteran friend on a sunny street corner, reading his favorite book. *Amen.*