

“Breaking the Rules”

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²⁸After he had said this, [Jesus] went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem. ²⁹When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, ³⁰saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. ³¹If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’” ³²So those who were sent departed and found it as he had told them. ³³As they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?” ³⁴They said, “The Lord needs it.” ³⁵Then they brought it to Jesus; and after throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set Jesus on it. ³⁶As he rode along, people kept spreading their cloaks on the road. ³⁷As he was now approaching the path down from the Mount of Olives, the whole multitude of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the deeds of power that they had seen, ³⁸saying, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!” ³⁹Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, order your disciples to stop.” ⁴⁰He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.” (Luke 19:28-40)

As the first-born child in my family, I was always a big rule-follower. It is one of those traits that psychologists who study birth order have noticed about eldest siblings. First-born children tend to be conscientious and responsible. They can be cautious but they are reliable. First-borns color within the lines and don't feel the need to stray too far from the beaten path. If I ever had any doubts about this theory, they were erased one Christmas break when I was in high school, and my mom and I ran into my old kindergarten teacher while we were doing some holiday shopping. As we reminisced about the good old days of kindergarten, my teacher thoughtfully said, “You know, it always used to bother you when people didn't follow the rules.” I had never really thought about it that way, but she was right. That did bother me then. It still bothers me even now.

However, as I've gotten older, I have learned – as we all do – that even really good rules do not work perfectly in every situation. Interestingly, it could have been the very same year that I ran into my old kindergarten teacher that Eddie Murphy starred in a movie called “The Golden Child.” It is not high-brow stuff, but some of you may remember it. Eddie Murphy plays a private investigator who specializes in finding lost children. He is hired by some Tibetan monks to find a missing boy, a “Golden Child” who possesses special mystical powers. To liberate the boy, the detective must first obtain the enchanted dagger of Ajanti. Unfortunately, the dagger is housed in a treacherous cavern, and anyone who wants to obtain it must survive a deadly gauntlet of obstacles. He is warned that “only one whose heart is true” can hope to survive the challenges and claim the knife.

As he enters the cave, the detective is given two rules: (1) he must stay on the path, and (2) as he crosses the obstacles, he must carry a full glass of water without spilling one drop. Compliance is challenged with every step, as he crosses rickety swinging bridges and stepping stones fall away around his feet. He stumbles several times, but in each instance, he manages to stay on the path and to somehow keep the water from spilling. As he nears the end of the path and sees the knife for the first time, the rickety bridge he has just crossed bursts into flame and plummets into the abyss. His path out of the cave is now



gone. In frustration, he shouts out into the darkness "I thought you said I was supposed to stay on the path!"

A voice then echoes back to him, "Yes, but you have to know when to break the rules."

He finally makes it to the knife, but as he reaches out for it, intense flames shoot up all around it. Each time he tries to take hold of the prize, the flames rise up higher and burn him.

"I've obeyed all your rules!" he shouts in frustration. "What am I doing wrong?"

This time, there is no response from the darkness. But in that moment, he remembers what the voice has already said. In a go-for-broke kind of gamble, he raises the glass as a toast, and then drinks the water down. With each gulp, the flames fall. Once the glass is empty, he is able to reach out and take hold of the dagger. Did he break the rules, or just interpret them? Either way, even a rule-follower first born son would have to agree, sometimes you just have to know when to break the rules.

Now, what does all this have to do with Palm Sunday? As the first-born son of God, we could say that Jesus was a rule follower. At the same time, if we pay attention to his healing, his preaching, his teaching, and his living, we see that Jesus broke rules all the time. At the very least, he interpreted the rules very differently than others. He and his disciples picked grain on the Sabbath and ate it, which made the Pharisees mad.¹ He healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, and the Pharisees got mad again.² In Luke 8, when an unclean, diseased woman touches Jesus, the rule enforcers wanted to punish her with death.³ Instead, Jesus praised her faith, healed her, and sent her away in peace. Jesus touched lepers when he wasn't supposed to. He talked to women when he wasn't supposed to. He refused to wash his hands when he was supposed to. With remarkable consistency, he ignored rules that were getting in the way of his work.

And even now, as he reaches the walls of Jerusalem, he is still breaking rules. The long-expected Messiah was supposed to come in large and in charge, with power and arrogance, speaking loudly and carrying a big stick, surrounded by military might and the spoils of war. His very presence was supposed to make enemies shrink away in fear. But look at this one who is said to be the Messiah... riding in on a humble colt... not with military escort waving swords but with a hodgepodge of children and peasants waving palm branches. He invokes the power of love instead of fear... he says that weakness is strength... he claims that what the world sees as wise is foolish and what seems foolish to the world is wise... he promises that those who are last will soon be first.

And then there was the one rule that was impossible to break – the rule that was above all rules – the fact that for every person there is an inevitable and permanent end. The last and greatest enemy was death, and its final darkness comes for all. Jesus had his eyes set on that rule above all others. That rule, especially, would have to go.

No question, Jesus was a good son – faithful, obedient, responsible, reliable. He accepted that many rules are good and helpful. But he also knew, as Augustine later said, that an unjust law is no law at all... and that, as Aquinas wrote, a rule is only legitimate if it serves the common good and "uplifts human personality." When the rules of the world are getting in the way of true justice... when laws imposed by the powers that be are not

¹ Luke 6:1-5.

² Luke 6:6-11.

³ "Talmud Laws of Menstruation," http://www.come-and-hear.com/editor/america_3.html

serving the better angels of our nature, but are instead bringing out the worst in us, the righteous can neither follow nor abide such laws. In short, Jesus knew that, sometimes you have to break the rules.

I heard a story a while back about a Saturday morning game in a youth soccer league. The teams on the field were arch-rivals (to the extent you can have an arch-rival when you're eight). It's more accurate to say that the parents were arch-rivals. They wanted their kids to beat that other team, and their passion in the stands was strong enough that, pretty soon, the kids started feeding off of it. The game started getting aggressive, and then a little more. And once the pushing and tripping started, that's when the parents really stepped up. Grown adults started cursing at the refs, the kids, and fans on the opposite side. The man who was telling the story admitted that he joined right in with all of it. He was as angry as anybody out there. He said things were about to really get out of hand... and then something happened that changed it all.

All of the sudden, a lone voice from the sideline broke through the cacophony: "LOOKING FOR A KID!"

Almost instantaneously, everything seemed to pause. A parent from the opposing team couldn't find his four-year-old son. Without anybody having to say another word, the game stopped. Everybody fanned out. People went out in every direction. Dads from the home team linked up with guys from the visiting team to comb the area. For ten minutes, the group searched as one, cohesive unit, until somebody found the little guy. He'd wandered off with another family.

As the grateful father wrapped his lost son in a huge and thankful hug, the dad who was telling the story realized that, just moments before, he had been yelling at that very same man to "shut up" because he was so annoying.

After that, the teams went back out and they finished the game, but now there was a lot less yelling. Everything was cleaner, with a lot more grace and a lot more gratitude.

They had all been arguing up and down about the rules, but in the heat of it all, they had forgotten one of the most important rules. Later, one parent said she saw the whole situation as a metaphor for how we are living and treating each other in our society. "Even with so many benches and so many teams and so much dirty play," she said, "we still know deep down that we belong to each other. We still know there is no such thing as other people's children... One of the rules is that every once in a while, we just gotta stop yelling and take care of each other's babies."

She took a lesson from that day that she now tries to live by. "Find a moment to break the rules today," she says. "Stop the game and find each other again."⁴

As Jesus rides the dangerous path into the city of Jerusalem, his purpose is to stop the game – the bitter, hateful, murderous conflict of our human world – so that humanity might have a chance to remember what is really important, and find itself again. He had come because the Spirit of the Lord had anointed him *"to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free... and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*⁵ And to get there, some rules that were standing in the way would just have to be broken.

⁴ Glennon Doyle Melton, "Momastery" blog, posted on her Facebook page on March 3, 2016, 9:14 a.m.

⁵ Luke 4:18-19.

Thanks be to God for the rule-breaking savior, the One who comes in the name of the Lord that we might find each other again. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**