

## **“Holy Rule Breaking” Sunday, August 21, 2022**

**Dear church,**

Let me say this first: it’s good to have rules that people agree upon and abide by. We could not live and survive without some good laws, right? Imagine everybody just did what suited them without consideration for others. What would traffic be like without traffic signs and speed regulations, an agreement on which side of the road to drive or standard equipment for cars, such as turn signals and windshield wipers? It would be utter chaos! So, case closed. Every civilization, every group of people needs some rules. Of course, sometimes there are simply too many of them, too many regulations, too much red tape, preventing things from getting done. Or the rules don’t achieve what they were intended to. People circumvent them. They play the game. Or the rules are antiquated, fossils from a different era, no longer relevant. And then, every once in a while there may also be a good reason, a godly reason to break an otherwise reasonable rule. Like Jesus when he “worked” on Holy Sabbath to bring healing to a suffering human being. I call it Holy Rule-Breaking.

I would like to share with you a somewhat more contemporary story about Holy-Rule Breaking, only six decades old. Last February, the people in the city of Hamburg marked the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a historic flood that devastated this city of two million people on the northern coast of Europe. A perfect storm gathered on February 16, 1962. Winds and powerful gales aligned in a frenzy to drive the waters of the North Sea upriver, reaching levels never seen before, breaking down communication towers on the way, overwhelming dikes and leaving the city defenseless.

The police senator of Hamburg was a young, energetic man with a swift grasp of things. He realized immediately that countless lives were in danger and decided to break the rules. Without the proper authority, he took charge, coordinated the rescue operations, requesting emergency help from other European countries and parts of the German military. He overstepped his legal authority, ignoring the German constitution's prohibition on using the army for "internal affairs" (a clause excluding disasters was not added until 1968). By acting so decisively, he got help quickly from other NATO states. They brought in helicopters, which were called “*Fliegende Engel*” (Flying Angels) by the people because they

picked up folks from the roof tops. There is no doubt that this rule-breaking in the service of humanity saved hundreds, if not thousands of lives. The senator later had a successful political career, served as German chancellor for 8 years and was never known to be a “rule breaker”. He just had good judgment in an extreme situation – and guts. His name was Helmut Schmidt and when he died at the ripe age of almost 97, the people of Hamburg remembered him for many things, but especially for his brave leadership during the flood.

Of course, one has to be careful about the business of rule breaking. It requires above all personal integrity - a lot of integrity, and respect for the law - deep respect. It must be clear that the rules are broken not because one just likes the power, freedom and maverick status that often come with it. In our times, maverick behavior often gets rewarded by a following on social media and crowned with cult and celebrity status. “Look how cool I am. I can break the rules and get away with it!” In fact, that is one of the bigger problems of our time, isn’t it - that people parade rule-breaking as a virtue. For a person of integrity, it never is. It’s always the exception and there have to be very good reasons, life-giving or life-saving reasons to do so.

Which brings us to Jesus, who, - it is true - broke the rules a number of times and most often on Holy Sabbath in order to save life. I suspect that many of you feel a little indifferent about that because those Jewish Sabbath rules feel antiquated to us anyway. “Why would anyone have a problem with a Sunday healing?” you ask. It should not be prohibited but rather celebrated and rewarded... But before you yawn too much about this particular rule-breaking of Jesus, let us reconsider for a moment.

Looking at today’s gospel lesson from the distance of two thousand years, from the vantage point of a culture that works and operates seven days a week and seemingly doesn’t know how to stop - ever, we may actually be asked to re-appreciate the original rule: “Keep the Sabbath Day holy.” Or try to keep one part of the Sabbath Day holy! Or try to keep one hour of the Sabbath Day holy! That would be a start for a culture that doesn’t understand the deeper wisdom of the Third Commandment. In fact, it could be lifesaving. I’m not exaggerating.

The Sabbath Law is rooted in the Jewish/Christian tradition. It was there long before Jesus and it remained long after him. During the Industrial Revolution, when so many people were forced to toil insanely long hours under unsafe conditions, Sundays were often the only days of rest. This remnant of religious observation saved many a worker from boundless demands. It was and it still is a good general rule: work six days and on the seventh day, take a good rest and nurture your soul. So important was the Sabbath Law to the Jewish people that they wove it into the story of Creation. Even God rested on the seventh day. Even God needed rest. I am sure Jesus also rested on the seventh day except when he found someone in need whom he could bless with healing energy. And so, we find ourselves in quite a different position from the people who criticized Christ in this gospel story. We may have to break the unwritten rules of our time – the constant, compulsive unrest etched into the psyche of modern people - in order to find healing. We may have to become holy rule breakers of the modern secular society in order to become the people of God in this century. It takes guts and being different. But the reward is huge. It's called life. And that's what holy rule breakers are all about: life.

**AMEN**