

# STIRRING UP TROUBLE

John 5:1-9  
May 13, 2007 – Mother's Day  
Rev. James Campbell

In the church of my childhood, Mother's Day is as close as we ever came to a high holy day. It was the one-day of the year when the patriarchy that dominated that church was flipped on its head. It was the mother who ruled for a day. Corsages were given out to the champions among these women: the oldest mother; the youngest mother; the newest mother; the mother with the most children; the mother with the youngest child; the mother with the oldest child. It went on and on and on. My mom never won any of those contest. But that was OK with me. I thought she was great just the same.

My mom's child rearing techniques were a strange mixture of the old and new. She had been raised on a farm, and wanted us to know the value of hard work and discipline. But she also read Dr. Spock, much to my father's chagrin. She was unconventional in some ways and very conventional in others... especially when it came to "The Rules" – those culturally accepted practices that keep American society in good running order. This meant, among other things, good behavior in school. My mom used to tell the teachers that if we misbehaved, they not only had permission to paddle us... but we would get it again once we got home – a sort of paddling double jeopardy. My mom wasn't cruel. She just didn't want her kids to suffer unnecessarily because we didn't know how to follow the rules, how to fit in.

We all have rules to follow. Can you imagine the chaos of this world if there were no rules? But there's a big difference between rules that help people and rules that hurt people. And we're not always very good at distinguishing one from the other. The temptation to try to control others is simply too delicious for lots of folks. And unfortunately for us Christians, some of those controlling folks have used their mother, "Mother Church" to "keep people in line" and to exert control. With a heavy reliance on "law and punishment" and scant attention to the broadness of "grace," Mother Church makes pronouncements about political choices and sex and families and medical procedures. No wonder the free thinkers among us have little interest in church. They assume, and often rightly so, that they will be forced to conform to some rigid, predetermined way of living and thinking. And the good news becomes bad news when Christians are of rules instead of people of grace.

Jesus had gone up to Jerusalem for a festival. And he visited a pool called Bethesda, which means "house of grace" or "house of mercy." This public pool, surrounded by five beautiful porticoes, was renowned for its healing properties. Rumor had it that once a day an angel of the Lord came to stir up the waters, and when that happened, the first person to get into the pool would be healed. Our own Bethesda Fountain in Central Park is named after this story. Now imagine the scene – the crippled and the blind and the deaf and the deformed all waiting for their one chance to follow the rules just right, to be the first to get into the stirred up water, in order to be free.

Of all the sick people there, Jesus was drawn to a crippled man, who'd been that way for 38 years. How many of those years had he laid by that pool? How many times had he struggled to follow the rules and be the first one in? Jesus asked him: "Do you want to be made well?" "Well, what do you think?" the man probably thought. But John reports that he simply replied: "I don't have anyone to help me into the pool. Someone is always getting in before me."

Now Jesus could have waited with the man, until the water was stirred that day, and helped him to be the first one in. Jesus could have used the rules to heal this man. But he didn't. Instead, he discarded convention completely. He skipped the pool and its healing waters, ignoring the fact that this was the way it had always been done. "Get up, take up your bed and walk," Jesus said. And with these words, Jesus once again declared the triumph of grace over the strictures of the law.

The shocked man got up and walked for the first time in 38 years. And John tells us, in a sort of throwaway line, that it just happened to be the Sabbath. And since no work can be done on the Sabbath, Jesus wasn't supposed to heal the man, and the man was certainly not supposed to pick up his mat and walk. This all created quite a scandal. The verses that follow this lesson read: "The religious leaders stopped the healed man and said, "It's the Sabbath. You can't carry your bedroll around. It's against the rules." But he told them, "The man who made me well told me to. He said, 'Take your bedroll and start walking.'" They asked, "Who gave you the order to take it up and start walking?" But the healed man didn't know, for Jesus had slipped away into the crowd."

And there is the other unconventional scandal of this passage. Not only did Jesus ignore Sabbath rules in order to be compassionate, but the man who was healed did not even know who Jesus was! He didn't know him as the miracle-working rabbi of the poor, let alone as God's Messiah. He didn't have a clue, he didn't have a correct theology... and it didn't matter. For grace does not only break rules. Grace is free... and broad... and generous beyond our comprehension.

And it is this grace, not the rules, that *is* the good news of the gospel. And how shameful it is that the church acts so often as a gatekeeper instead of a wall breaker. What a tragedy that so many spend so much of the church's time is spent on trying to keep a lid on things instead of stirring up trouble in order to set people free.

I think it is very tempting for those of us in the United Church of Christ, with our bold social stands, to believe that we have somehow escaped the traps of graceless rule keeping. After all, we were the first major Protestant group to ordain a woman and an African American and a gay man and a lesbian. We are the people who fight institutional racism and sexism and homophobia. We tend to make a lot of other Christians mad at us, because we seem forever to be tearing down walls, breaking rules, proclaiming grace triumphant. But the work is not done in us.

Last weekend I was at UCC Headquarters in Cleveland for an intensive church growth conference called "Ready, Set, Grow!" It was great to meet people from all over the US who love our church and long and pray and work for its renewed vitality.

This wasn't just a weekend about theory. It was also about practice. And we heard lots of stories of struggling UCC churches that had come back to life. But the story that captured my imagination concerned Pilgrim Congregational UCC in Cleveland. It had its salad days once, peaking at 961 members, but by the 1980s, the congregation considered closing its doors forever, citing a lack of people and money. But instead of giving up, the folks who remained at Pilgrim called a new pastor, the Rev. Dr. Laurie Hafner. And what happened in the next fifteen years was nothing short of a miracle. That church, who already thought of itself as open and progressive, discovered that there was still more to learn. They began to open themselves to very different people. And this stirred up some trouble, as they broke long established rules – rules about who could be part of their family; rules about how they would worship God; rules about how to do the business of the church. Not everyone liked it. Some people thought they should keep doing things the way they always had. But instead the majority of the people chose the Jesus way, that way that breaks down walls and violates established order so that grace can flow wherever it will. And today, Pilgrim Church has been born again, with 550 unconventional, rule breaking, grace loving members.

Of course, I could not sit there and listen to their story without thinking of our story. I thought about how much I love this church. And I let myself dream of what we might look like in five, ten or fifteen years if we are brave enough to ask: what rules still bind us? What limits do we put on grace? What customs and traditions keep people on the other side of these walls? And are we willing to jettison those things that weigh us down, no matter how beloved they might be?

Welcoming people is more than just words. Welcoming people means making room for them. Welcoming people can mean breaking the rules. Welcoming people often means to stir up trouble, so that grace, God's limitless love and mercy, can flow in and around us, like healing waters.