

Read Luke 6: 6-11

Joan's mother, Ruby, was sick with stomach flu last week, then Joan and I got it. I'll spare you the details. You know what happens when people have stomach flu. It isn't pretty. We have a neighbor, Patty, who called when she heard Ruby was sick and said, "If I can do anything at all to help, anything at all, just let me know and I'll do it."

I said, "Well, Patty, that's very kind of you. As a matter of fact, when Ruby gets sick, we have to clean up after her. If you could come over and do that for us, we'd appreciate it."

Patty said, "No, I don't think so."

"So when you said you'd do anything at all, you didn't really mean it, did you?"

Patty said, "No, not really. I was just being nice."

I would have been mad, except I've done the same thing myself. Offering to do something for someone—*Anything at all! Just let me know!*—while hoping they didn't take my offer of help literally. Of course, we do that because it is the expected gesture of support, the right thing to say when someone is having difficulty. There are lots of thing we do and say and believe because we've been taught they're the right things to do and say and believe.

That's especially true about our life in the church. Many of the things we believe aren't based on reality or our own experience or observations. We've simply been told that being a Christian means believing the right things, so we believed them. This is called orthodoxy, which comes from the Greek word *orthodoxos*, which means *to have the right opinion*. And, of course, if there is a "right opinion" then we will be expected to agree with it, and our compliance with orthodoxy becomes the standard by which our faith and commitment are judged.

The problem with this, and we've all seen it, is that people can believe all the right things and still be jerks. In fact, I would venture to say there is a correlation between how firmly we believe something and our willingness to commit evil in order to make sure others believe it, too. I think it was Pascal who said, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction."

We've been thinking about if the church were Christian. This morning I'd like to direct our attention to orthodoxy and conduct, and suggest that while the church has historically emphasized orthodoxy or having the right opinion, if the church lived out the values of Jesus, it would care less about orthodoxy and more about gracious behavior.

In this morning's gospel reading, Jesus healed on the Sabbath, a clear violation of orthodoxy. In that one act, Jesus reveals his priorities—that when made to choose between being orthodox and being gracious, Jesus always chose to be gracious. Always. Jesus never, not once, went to the mat for orthodoxy. Did he have contempt for tradition? I don't think so. The Bible seems to indicate he valued tradition and custom and the time-honored teachings of his Jewish faith. You don't get to teach in the synagogue as he did without some commitment to the synagogue's values. But it is also clear Jesus felt free to lay those traditions and customs aside when they prevented him from being gracious.

We gather in this meetinghouse to worship and we value the Quaker traditions and teachings and processes. But let's not ever let our appreciation for those things become so dogged, so set in stone, that they keep us from being gracious.

I remember attending Catholic college and going to Mass. They wanted us to go to Mass every now and then, so I went. When in Rome... One day, the priest gave this tremendous message. It was so beautiful and I was deeply moved by it. It came time for communion and I went forward. When you were a Catholic as long as I was and the priest sets the table for dinner, you sit down out of pure instinct.

So I'm in line for communion and there are two priests, standing side by side, giving communion. It comes my turn. They both look at me. They know I'm Quaker, and according to the rules of their church can't receive communion. I'd forgotten that. I'd just been moved by the worship and wanted to be a part of things with everyone else. So here are these two priests. One of the priests looks at me, then looks at the other priest and shakes his head discretely, "No." But the other priest nods his head "Yes." I'm standing there, watching this, too young to appreciate the dilemma my presence at communion had created, when the priest who'd nodded his head "Yes," reached out and shared his bread with me.

Now that other priest, he was a pit-bull. I heard he gave the other priest six fits. A few days later, the priest who shared with me, told me, "Anytime you want communion, you come to my line." I look back on that now and think, "There's a guy who understood the work of the church." I mean, I don't go to church to learn how to diminish and exclude, do you? I can do that on my own. I want to learn how to include. I want to crack out of this hard shell and be free to love and help and heal. I want to stand in that line where they're passing out grace, where they're sharing the bread, where they're healing withered hands. Put me in that line. Isn't that where you want to stand?

If the church were Christian, it would care less about orthodoxy and more about grace. So love before rules, because only love endures. Rules exclude. Love includes.

I remember¹ when I first moved to Plainfield, thirty or so years ago. I was out walking one day and I passed by this man who was measuring bricks. Measuring each one, every now and then throwing aside what appeared to me to be perfectly good bricks. So I stopped and asked him what he was doing.

“I’m building a wall,” he said. “And I need each brick to be exactly the same or else the wall will fall down.”

So he was measuring each brick, and throwing aside the bricks that didn’t measure up, that were just a smidgen too short or too long.

Now there was another man down the street building a wall around his garden, and he was using any old rock. People knew he was building a rock wall, so they would bring him their rocks. Farmers brought him their rocks—big rocks, little rocks, round rocks, squared off foundation rocks. No two of them alike. Dark rocks. Light rocks. He was mixing up mortar and fitting those rocks together and after awhile had himself a beautiful rock wall surrounding his garden.

¹ A story by Fred Craddock helped recall this memory. His story was better than mine.

I drive down that same street every now and then. That brick wall, it fell down years ago. You can see the ruins of it. Just a heap of bricks. But that stone wall, it's prettier every year. Moss shines green in the dark recesses of it. A run of ivy in one corner. It's just beautiful. Every time I go by, I slow and look at it, marvel at how it fits together. It's like art, like a painting.

Now here's the thing, some people want to build the church with bricks. They want everyone to be the same, believe the same, follow the same rules, because they really believe, deep inside, that if everyone is exactly the same, believes the same, thinks the same, acts the same, it will make for a strong, enduring church. But it never does, and after a few years, the mortar cracks, and the surface spalls, and down it goes.

But if we get the mortar right, if we get that love right that holds us together, if we can discern when gracious behavior is more important than right belief, well, we can take living stones of every size and shape and fit them together, and we'll fit something together that will not only be a joy to behold, it will endure. And it will endure, not because every piece of it is the same, but because it isn't, because every part of it is different, but working together to create something inexpressibly lovely which gladdens God and heals us.