

Breaking the Rules
Mark 2:13-3:6
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational UCC
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In January 1963 a handful of Birmingham, Alabama's white, liberal Christian ministers wrote a public letter arguing against the tactics of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, in particular their open breaking of the law. King, while in jail that April, wrote a response—The Letter from Birmingham Jail—which I believe should be included in an expansion of our canon.

In that Letter, King, among other things, gave a theological defense of the movement and judged the timidity and unchristian stance of the white ministers. King wrote, "There are *just* and *unjust* laws. I would agree with Saint Augustine that 'An unjust law is no law at all.'"

But how to determine the difference? "An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law." King references the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas. He then develops this idea, "Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust."

Segregation laws did not pass the test, so, he could "urge men to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong."

In fact, the protestor has a greater respect for law than does the white supremacist or the even the white moderate, because the protestors are upholding the moral law not the particular laws of the state and nation. They are advocating for particular laws that correspond to the moral law.

King wrote, "I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice, and that when they fail to do this they become dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress."

And so, the nonviolent direct action of the Civil Rights Movement broke the law in order to bring injustice to attention and lead to social change. Elsewhere, King explained his goals:

The goal of our demonstrations . . . is to dramatize the existence of injustice and to bring about the presence of justice by methods of nonviolence. Long years of experience indicate to us that [we] can achieve this goal when four things occur:

1. Nonviolent demonstrators go into the streets to exercise their constitutional rights.
2. Racists resist by unleashing violence against them.
3. Americans of conscience in the name of decency demand federal intervention and legislation.
4. The administration, under mass pressure, initiates measures of immediate intervention and remedial legislation.

The working out of this process has never been simple or tranquil.

What empowered the protestors to suffer violence inflicted upon their souls and bodies? Their faith. For instance, King spoke about the struggle against Bull Connor in Birmingham. The marchers would go forth singing “Ain’t gonna let nobody turn me round,” and Connor would unleash dogs and firehoses. King recalled, “Bull Connor didn’t know history. . . we went before the fire hoses; we had known water. If we were Baptist or some other denomination, we had been immersed. If we were Methodist, and some others, we had been sprinkled, but we knew water.”

The waters of baptism, the sign and symbol of our call to follow Jesus and resist the forces of evil, empower us to struggle for justice and righteousness, especially when that means breaking unjust laws and defying the powers-that-be.

Scholar Ched Myers writes that at this point in the Gospel of Mark, “The portrait now emerging is of a Jesus who is continually surrounded by the poor, who attends to their importune cries for healing and wholeness, and who acts not just to bind up their wounds but to attack the structures that perpetuate their oppression.”

Jesus isn’t advocating charity, but a reordering of society. Herman Waetjen writes, “If the glory of God is to become incarnate in human beings created in God’s image and likeness, the old order must be subverted.” And Jesus is about to bring that about because God has named him “the New Human Being” to act on God’s behalf.

And so this series of stories is about how Jesus’ action elicits confrontation from the various authorities and how Jesus works deliberately to subvert key themes of his opponents. For example, Jesus challenges core elements of the theology of the Pharisees around “the rules of table fellowship, public piety, and maintenance of the Sabbath” [Myers] in these episodes. The Pharisees are themselves a reform movement, but Jesus doesn’t think they go far enough in overturning the old order, that their practice of holiness works to exclude people rather than create an inclusive, egalitarian order.

And in this final episode, the one that really angers the authorities, compelling the reformist Pharisees to create an alliance with their opponents the Herodians, Jesus engages in what Myers calls “carefully staged political theater” to make his point that the law exists to help people, and so he openly breaks the law.

Professor Ben Witherington III writes that “Mark presents Jesus as one who must cast the truth like a stone through a plate glass window.”

Jesus is the truth-teller who breaks the rules because it is the sick who need his help, not those for whom everything is okay. Jesus directly confronts the religious and political authorities through life-giving action on behalf of the people who need it, and invites us to do the same.