

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

***Freedom is Knots for the Faint of Heart***

*Isaiah 58.9b-14; Luke 13.10-17*

Russ Dean, September 16, 2007



David Womble was known in Boy Scout Troop 111 as the Knot Master. He knew every one in the merit badge book. He could tie them all fast, form them perfectly, and tell you their history. I studied all of those perfect examples, which he had tied neatly using a small hemp rope and tacked and labeled on that board hanging on the wall of the scout hut. David made we want to learn who developed the clove hitch and why, what a sheep shank is properly used for, and why I just had to learn how to braid a splice. I did not succeed David in his role in the troop, but he bequeathed to me his love of a well-designed tangle in a length of rope.

There was obviously an anal-retentive Boy Scout wannabe, or two, in the rabbinical assembly that decided centuries ago which knots could and could not be tied on the Sabbath. The barrel knot was obviously out – all that wrapping and looping was entirely too much work, and the sheet bend required the mixing of two different kinds of rope, probably a questionable Sabbath practice. I think the square knot, for its simplicity and perfect symmetry may have appealed to them. There's even appropriate theological significance: God is known from the four corners of the earth and in the four winds.

Orthodox Jews were serious about Sabbath keeping, and we can learn from them, however we choose to employ their truth in our modern lives. A day free from the worries and work of the week, a day set apart, was the intent of the law – it is a day many

stressed-out Americans would do well to learn to honor.<sup>1</sup> The legalistic keeping of the law was just the outcome, if sometimes overdone, of trying to be faithful.<sup>2</sup>

Though some of the rules sound petty to our ears, the Jewish keeping of the Sabbath is little different than what we'd done in the name of freedom in this country. Our supreme court, daily, hears pleas and appeals, and determines in minute detail what it means to be "free." Can I, for example, sue the fast food company for my injuries, even if I voluntarily ordered and paid for the piping hot coffee which I then accidentally spilled on my own leg? In the name of freedom, apparently so. Can I use narcotics in my worship practice if I define such a practice as intrinsic to my religious tradition? In the name of freedom, apparently so.<sup>3</sup> When I read the ancient rules set forth by ancient Judaism, I may be quick to scoff – what could be more foolish than studying how far you could allow your animal to walk on the Sabbath to get water, or what kind of knot you could use to tie it when it was finished? But as soon as I'm ready to point my judgmental finger, I find legalism in our practice all around – religious, political, military, social, etc..., and Baptists may be the most guilty of all for our obsession with the "jot and tittle" of the law.

And, note that what Jesus rebukes after setting this woman free, is not the Sabbath law. He does not say the law is bad – only that keeping that law in a manner which does harm to those it intends to protect, is wrong. *Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath* (Mark 2.27). Rabbi Murray Ezring reminds me

---

<sup>1</sup> I don't know how to apply this ancient practice in a modern world. We are facing the difficulties more and more with children and baseball and other demands for Sunday time. I do believe, however, it is a conversation worth the struggle, and that the signs of our stress are apparent in numerous health and happiness measures that could be cited.

<sup>2</sup> Though I am not a legalist, in any way, I do not intend to demean those who practice their religion as faithful Jews do. We need to recognize the cultural and religious prejudices that bias our own thinking and practice.

<sup>3</sup> Many more examples could be cited. These two were well-known cases which made headline news.

that the Jewish law was not Western in its logic, but was designed and interpreted by an Eastern mind, and with a relational, not a rational, objective. (For even how well you tied your animal might have an impact on your neighbor – if your knot did not hold and your beast destroyed your property, there was a relational issue at stake.) So Jesus, according to the good Rabbi, was well within the thought of the Judaism of his day to interpret Sabbath practice just as he did. Murray told me that this synagogue leader sounds like a Sadducee, legalistic and unbending, seeking to conserve the faith of his inheritance, and (and I could see him smiling on the other end of the phone with a certain Jewish satisfaction when he told me) Jesus, sounds like a good Pharisee! The Pharisees were the liberals of their day, willing to think about the law and carefully interpret its application.

Read at face value, this story of Luke's gospel is a simple miracle story. ("Simple miracle" I say!) This woman is bound by an ailment that Jesus, by the power of God, sets her free. Today let us, again, hear this not-so-simple truth. The affirmation of the Church over the centuries is that Jesus does, in fact, have the power to free us from all that binds. Multitudes have claimed physical healing in the name of Jesus. Even more have known a spiritual, emotional, or mental freedom that comes when one commits one's life to Jesus' Way. So as we hear again of this woman, long bound and then set free by the touch of Jesus, let us give thanks for all who have known such an experience. And let none of us, out of our sophistication or cynicism, doubt to the point that we cannot celebrate with those who have gained such freedom, that such power is loose in this world.

But there is a larger story. Oh, we do love the sensational, the spectacular. So crowds, by the hundreds of thousands are drawn every year to the crusades of the faith

healers, still, some to be healed, some just to see – for we have not yet learned, as a human race, that there is even a greater truth than that which appears on the surface of things. Yes, Luke says Jesus brought physical freedom to this woman, but the *freedom for which Christ sets us free* (Galatians 5.1), as Paul tells the Galatians, is a far greater freedom than from our physical infirmities. It is even a far greater freedom than he brings as salvation to the individual. As powerful as those freedoms are, Jesus was working to free us from our institutions, our traditions, the structures of power that keep the world bound.

You see, this woman was bound by her infirmity, but even more than this, she was bound by an oppressive system, which interpreted the law to work against her. And the power which Jesus brought, the power of healing, was a work wrought against a religious and political system which would keep those already bound, forever bound in the guilt and shame of their “unworthiness.” (Unworthiness, as defined by the system.) Someone said in a Wednesday night discussion once, “I believe people are sinful, but I don’t believe institutions are sinful.” Let me strongly disagree. I believe people are sinful, and I believe institutions and structures and “systems” are infinitely more so. Because systems, which the Bible calls “*principalities and powers*” (Ephesians 6.12<sup>4</sup>) become larger than the people who create them – and systems begin to hold power over us.

---

<sup>4</sup> *For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh (“humans are sinful”), but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness (“principalities and powers,” KJV), against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (“institutions are sinful”).* The phrase is often interpreted to mean there is a battle of “angels” and “demons” being waged, that great cosmic battle between God and Satan. I believe a much better interpretation is to understand these “powers” as human in nature, systems of our own making.

There are systems called “communism” and “capitalism,” “democracy” and “monarchy,” “Islam” and “Judaism” and “Christianity,” just to name a few. Adherents proclaim the inherent goodness of their system, and this may be so (inherently). But every system, whether it be the “military industrial complex” or that most pernicious of all systems called “tradition” (you know, the system of “we’ve never done it like that before”), is a “*principality and power*” which threatens to undo us, by stripping the freedom from all who are gathered into its reach.

Jesus, in healing a poor woman on the Sabbath, is not just trying to show off some kind of divine power. Jesus is taking on a system, which has kept this woman bound, whether by intention or not. In the condescension of the Jewish leader, don’t you imagine that she felt even smaller, as if she had done something wrong just to want to stand up straight and look Jesus in the eye to thank him? Systems of all kinds do this – they keep us bent over, not so much by our infirmities as by our fear.

Fear is the greatest tool of the *principalities and powers*, and Jesus, perhaps above all else, by his own courageous life, his unflinching commitment unto death, has called us to face the systems that bring injustice to the world, and with a loud voice, or with a soft touch, to bring those systems to their knees.

And here is where it gets tricky – for the dangerous thing about freedom is that it always works as a paradox: when we are truly free, when by God’s grace we have been freed from the ailments – and the systems – that keep us bound, we will no longer be free. The bumper sticker says “Freedom is not free” and this is true, indeed. But there may be, bound within that truth simply stated, even another system at work. For the bumper sticker taunts us to accept that freedom calls for the sacrifice of men and women.

Sometimes this is true, in the service of all that is good and right and wholesome and true – but sometimes even “freedom” becomes a slave in the service of a system which is so much bigger than those who are willing to give their lives to it. Even bigger than those who set the process into motion to begin with.

I fear that our President does not recognize that he is part of a system, that he, even the most powerful man in the world, is but a pawn to the *principalities and powers* that are always at work. Why does the rhetoric of this war keep changing? The enemy? The goal? The successes stated? Why does the mission itself seem so illusive? It is because there are *principalities and powers* at work, and those who in charge, and all who are at their mercy, are now being governed by the system itself. We are in its bondage.

Paul asks, almost helplessly, *Is there no one who can do anything for me* (Romans 7)? But his is a rhetorical question, for in Christ we can be free. Free from our ailments, and free from the systems that would keep us bound. For Christ’s freedom, when it has done its difficult work, makes us slaves – but not to the system. Real freedom changes the rules completely, and makes us slaves... to love. Slave to one another. Slaves to a *more excellent way* (1 Corinthians 13) – a way around the system. So when we have been freed, we find ourselves back in last week’s lesson on conflict – tied in knots if you will.

What will we do with our freedom? Will we stand straight and walk away to enjoy life only for ourselves, or will we turn in our newfound strength and face the system, fight the demons, brave the challenge at whatever cost, in order to claim freedom for all?

Freedom is Knots for the Faint of Heart.

God give us the knotty heart of Jesus, that we may be free, indeed.

May it be so!