

Last week, when we started this series, we saw Jesus begin his public ministry by healing several people. We also saw him rock the boat and break a lot of rules, shattering the nice, neat boundaries that the religious leaders of the day had established. When he healed a man with an unclean spirit, he didn't follow the usual rules, but rather he flouted convention and spoke harshly and with authority, commanding the unclean spirit to shut up and get out.

When he healed a leper, he broke the social norms and actually physically touched him, putting his own body at risk.

He also healed Simon's mother-in-law, and in doing so touched her, a woman, which was definitely not the norm.

And most interesting of all, he performed these healings, his WORK...on the Sabbath – something else that you just did NOT do.

In today's reading, he continues that trend of risky business, making unconventional choices and shaking things up. He says outright that yes, he has the authority to forgive sins – even though he knew that this would be seen by some as blasphemous or scandalous.

He ate with the undesirables, the outcasts of society – knowing that people would judge him negatively for that.

And he said something truly remarkable to the Pharisees, telling them that rather than fasting as a sign of reverence to God, according to religious protocol, people should be FEASTING and celebrating God's goodness.

With these actions and statements, the people around him were surely taken aback. Some were amazed, but others were aghast. This man was shattering those nice, neat boundaries they were all so accustomed to, and that can be really hard to understand or accept. It can feel like the rug is being pulled out from under you, like nothing makes sense, like your world is being turned upside down.

But the thing is, Jesus broke the rules and norms of his day, not to simply be revolutionary for the sake of it, but because he was following his heart, speaking and acting his truth, knowing that he was following his own divine guidance and doing what was right and what was needed in each situation.

Maybe that's something we can emulate in our own lives – following our heart, living our truth. And in doing just that, perhaps we'd be sort of boundary-breakers ourselves, breaking social conventions and cultural norms. Rather than pass by a homeless person thinking, as society likes say, "Oh, if I give them money, they'll just use it to buy drugs or alcohol" – maybe instead we do what we know in our hearts is right, and we help them out, buy them some food, or even just sit with them in companionship.

Rather than assume that people in jail deserve to be punished and are irredeemable and hopeless, as so many people do, maybe we show them compassion instead, and volunteer for prison ministry, or write letters or cards to prisoners to show the some love.

Rather than stay silent in order to not rock the boat when we witness someone being harassed or bullied, maybe we speak up.

Rather than toeing the line, maybe we can shatter people's ideas and show them a different way to act by setting an example of doing what's right vs. doing what is easy or nice and neat.

Jesus broke those social norms again when he chose to eat with the outcasts of society. He sat down with tax collectors and other undesirables and broke bread with them, and of course the Pharisees were a little confused and maybe even horrified – "why does he eat with such people?!" He told them that he was like a doctor tending to those who were ill, not healthy – in other words, he was going to the people who needed him most. He was sitting in camaraderie and friendship with those who truly needed it – those who were disrespected by society, ill-regarded, looked down upon.

Who are the "outcasts" of our society today? Who are the people who are seen and treated as less-than, unworthy of respect, discriminated against?

Gays. Muslims. People of color. The mentally disabled. Atheists. Overweight people. Immigrants. Women. Jews. Transgender individuals. And the list goes on.

These are the groups that I think society as a whole often looks down on, in ways big and small – from fat jokes on sitcoms to racial profiling by police, from anti-LGBT legislation to swastikas graffiti'd on buildings, from bullying people with Downs syndrome to anti-immigrant rhetoric.

How can we sit down in companionship and equality with those who suffer from the degradations of our society? How can we show them that they are respected and loved by God, just as we all are?

This is a time of such division in our country. It seems like there's such a huge gap in thinking between so many of us. I know there are people in my own life that I've chosen to block from my social media because their views are so completely counter to my own that it's hard for me to stomach.

And I don't know about you, but I feel like that gap is just getting wider and wider every day. People on all sides are getting more and more entrenched in their views, surrounding themselves with like-minded people who echo their own thoughts and strengthen them. Every day, the "others" in our world become a little further removed, a little more alien.

So how can we bridge that gap, how can we make it smaller?

Lately I've been seeing articles online about how to do this – and it's deceptively simple. It's what Jesus did. Getting started requires nothing more than reaching out to one another. Getting to know these "others". Realizing that no matter how different we are, we have more in common than we think.

Research has shown that our biases against other people, whether based on the color of their skin or the religion they embrace or their sexual orientation, these biases are reduced when we connect with people in that group. When we get to know them. There was even a study done that showed that our biases can even be reduced by simply imagining, truly visualizing, what it's like to walk in their shoes.

I read an interesting story a few months ago. A white Christian pastor of a Methodist church in Memphis, TN, read in the newspaper one morning that the Muslim Islamic Center had purchased 30 acres of land to build a new mosque and a “sprawling” community center. In his town. Directly across the street from his church.

And he felt scared. He felt queasy. He was unsure of what to do or how to react to this new development. And the members of his church were uneasy, too.

So he thought. And he prayed. And then, he placed an order for a big, six-foot-wide, bright red banner to display outside of his church, proclaiming to all who passed by exactly how they felt about that mosque being built.

(prompt Ed for photo)

“Heartsong Church welcomes Memphis Islamic Center to the neighborhood.”

Isn't that awesome?

Not only did he express his church's welcome to the Muslim community, he proclaimed it for ALL to see. And then he even took it a step further – when the new mosque wasn't going to be ready in time for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, one of the leaders on the board of the mosque came to the pastor to ask if they could rent a room in their church, just for the first few nights, just until the new building was ready. He not only agreed, he offered them the sanctuary itself, charged them no rent whatsoever, and there were church members there to welcome their Muslim brothers and sisters every single night for the entire month of Ramadan.

And both the pastor and his parishioners admit that by getting to know their Muslim neighbors, their fears have evaporated, and they've discovered commonalities and built new friendships.

Another, rather stunning example of reaching across the divide involves an African-American musician named Daryl Davis. He's shared the stage with some of the greats, including Chuck Berry and Little Richard, and he's still playing music today. But he has also gone out of his way to reach out and get to know members of the KKK.

(prompt Ed for photo)

In sitting down with them, getting to know them as people, and in turn allowing them to get to know him, he's not only diffused the focus on their differences, whether in terms of skin color or ideology, he's even forged actual friendships based on their commonalities – and in doing so, he has single-handedly inspired over 200 Klan members to disavow their beliefs and leave the KKK. As he says to them, “How can you hate me when you don't even know me?” He builds connections in order to bridge the gap, and uses friendship to break down barriers.

If these ordinary people can take these extraordinary steps, we can too – and our actions don't have to be that level of extraordinary. They can be as simple as getting together for a cup of coffee with someone of the opposite political persuasion, and talking respectfully and honestly about your views...approaching a lonely person on the outskirts of a room, introducing yourself, and striking up a conversation...making an effort to get to know people who are different from us, to remind ourselves and each other that ultimately, we're all the same, in that we come from the same divine source.

Now the last thing Jesus does in today's reading is really throw the people for a loop when he proclaims that rather than fasting, as was the religious norm, his disciples should be FEASTING and celebrating!

He made it clear that revering God doesn't need to happen by fasting or holding back, but rather by celebrating the abundance of God's love.

We've been talking about Jesus' risky behaviors...but what risk do we run when we toe the line, when we “fast” rather than “feast”?

We allow all kinds of things to hold us back from embracing and enjoying all the blessings that are available to us. Things like fear. Doubt. Worry. Concerns about what other people might think.

These all sound like pretty good things to let go of. So why is it so hard to do? What do we risk in releasing these things? In allowing God to help free us from these limitations?

Well, we risk having to find a new identity, one that isn't tied up in fear. We risk having to take chances and possibly fail. We risk losing friends who don't understand our new beliefs or attitudes.

But I think the more important question is, what do we risk by NOT freeing ourselves from these things that hold us back? We risk not living our lives fully. We risk not fully experiencing both the highs and lows of life, all that we're meant to experience.

We risk getting to the end of our lives and thinking, is that it?

There's a quote I love, by journalist and author Hunter S. Thompson, which says:

"Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming 'Wow! What a Ride!'"

This sparks in me the desire for adventure and living life to the fullest, but also for doing things a little differently. For breaking the rules. Shaking things up.

Living your life fully and not holding back means truly embracing your own values and beliefs, and following your heart and divine guidance to do what you feel is right – just as Jesus did.

And that might just mean connecting with people who are different from us, reminding each other that we all belong to each other, and bridging that divide.