

In the Greek Tragedy, “Prometheus Bound” by Aeschylus, the god Prometheus takes pity on the helpless, hapless state of men. So in an attempt to improve men’s lives, he steals the fire from heaven and gives it as a gift to men. But this act of compassion has disastrous results. In stealing fire he breaks Zeus’ laws of heaven and is thereby cruelly punished for his act of love for the human race. Zeus orders Prometheus to be bound forever to a cliff, an “*unvisited lonely rock*” where “*no human voice will reach thee here, no any form of man be seen.*”

We see a similar dynamic in our gospel reading this morning. Jesus is teaching on the Sabbath when He sees a woman in need. This woman has suffered from a debilitating ailment for 18 years. She is hunched over and presumably in pain. Jesus has compassion on her and heals her.

This infuriates the leader of the synagogue because Jesus has broken the religious rules of the Sabbath. Healing, apparently, constitutes work, and there is to be no work on the Sabbath. Jesus’ act of compassion provokes the ire of the religious rule keepers. So, the synagogue leader complains. Note that he complains to the crowd and not directly to Jesus – classic passive aggressive behavior there! “*There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days to be cured and not the Sabbath.*”

In the leader of the synagogue, we see a classic case, not just of passive aggressive behavior, but of religion at it’s worst. We see religion being used against a person. We see a case of putting the letter of the law before the spirit of the law. We see a case of ideology trumping love, of rigid code over human need. This form of spirit crushing animus thrives in every kind of religion and often the religious leaders are the worst offenders.

I count myself among the offenders. When I was first ordained, before I had really encountered and understood the radical grace of God, I was asked to do a wedding of a young couple here at Christ Church. The bride’s parents were very involved at church; the bride had grown up here. She and her fiancé were living in another city but she quite naturally wanted to get married in her beautiful home church.

I met with the couple for the requisite premarital counseling and discovered that the groom was not a professing Christian. The guy was a typical guy in his mid 20's, throwing himself into his new career – usually the questions of who God is are the last thing on the mind of a young man in his stage of life. But, at the time, I didn't consider that.

The Book of Common Prayer – my religious rulebook for weddings – states that only one of the people in a wedding ceremony is required to be a baptized Christian. But, at the time, I didn't consider that. I just decided that this young man didn't meet up to my religious standards. So, after meeting with the couple, I told them that I would not do their wedding.

I cringe when I think about this, and not just because the family took their pledge and left Christ Church. And not because I don't think it's really important for Christians to marry Christians. I believe with all my heart that the healthiest and happiest marriages are founded on a common understanding of the grace of God in Christ Jesus.

But how did I know that God wouldn't work through the marriage to bring this young couple closer to Him? And wasn't it a good thing that they were looking to the church for support on the most important day of their lives? Now, looking back, with the leader of the church flat out rejecting them from the church, the chances of their wanting anything to do with church seem slim.

I used religion against them. I really wish I could have that one back. Fortunately, they found an older, wiser minister, one more experienced in the grace of God to do their wedding for them. I was mad about this at the time; now I'm grateful that someone with a collar stepped in with the grace of God.

The world is sadly full of examples of religion at its worst, of religion being used against people. Truman Capote wrote a brilliant little autobiographical short story called A Christmas Memory. Set in the 30's, it's about his relationship with a daft but wonderful old cousin he lived with when he was a little boy. They lived in a rambling old country house owned by “the relatives” – priggish, stern adults. They were the kind of adults who would have made good synagogue leaders.

Each Christmas the boy, “Buddy” and his friend, as he called the cousin, made fruitcakes together. After the 30 cakes are done, they find they have an inch of liquor left over. They decide to have a little celebration and split the drink between them, sharing too with Queenie, the Jack Russell terrier. Here’s Buddy’s account of the incident.

*“Inside myself, I feel warm and sparky as those crumbling logs (in the fire), carefree as the wind in the chimney. My friend waltzes around the stove, the hem of her poor calico skirt pinched between her fingers as though it were a party dress....”*

*“Enter: two relatives. Very angry. Potent with eyes that scold, tongues that scold. Listen to what they say, the words tumbling together into a wrathful tune: ‘A child of seven! Whiskey on his breath! Road to ruination! ...shame! scandal! Humiliation! Kneel, pray, beg the Lord!’”*

Just for the record, we’re not in the habit of giving our 8 year old son Rob a shot of Jack Daniels at Christmas time. But Capote’s scene is a perfect description of aggression in the form of religion crushing the joyful spirit of childlike celebration.

This is the great downfall of religion – it is so easy to use it against people rather than for people. It is what Zeus did to Prometheus. It is what the synagogue leader did to the woman who needed help. It is what I did to this young couple. It is what the relatives did to Buddy and his friend. It is perhaps what you’ve done to others, or what others have done to you. And it is one reason that God the Father sent his Son Jesus Christ into the world – to show us what true religion really is.

True Christian religion is that God is for people, not against them. Jesus came for people. This is a good thing, because there is so much already against us. As we see in the gospel, the devil is against us. Jesus says the woman in need of healing has been “*bound by Satan for 18 years.*”

Not only is Satan against you, but someone else is inevitably against you. Liberals are against conservatives. Republicans are against Democrats. Skin color is against different skin color. Big business is against “the little people” as the outgoing BP exec said. Closer to home, mother is against daughters-in-law, older brother is against younger brother, especially when there is an estate to settle.

And even closer to home, most people are actually against themselves. As Faulkner famously said, the human heart is in conflict with itself. Your inner critic has the loudest voice. “I’m my own boss, and I have a really tough boss.”

So with Satan against you, others against you, you against you, the last thing you need is for religion to be against you. Hear this: Jesus Christ came to be for you. He was for the woman who was bound by Satan. He was for the young couple that I rejected. He was dancing by the Christmas tree with Buddy and his friend. He is for you, even when you are against yourself. And as the Bible says, “if God is for us, who can be against us?”

Make no mistake: God is for you. There can be no doubt about that. This is not because you are a great person; it is because He is a great God. God is for sinners. His “for you-ness” is decisively proven on the cross. Like Prometheus, Jesus Christ was bound. The religious leaders wanted to do away with him and his love for regular people. He threatened their institutional religious grip on the crowd. So they surrendered him to the authorities and demanded his death. They bound him to an unvisited lonely cross. And there they killed him. The religious people killed the Son of God. Religion was used against God.

Lest we get self-righteous about the religious people, we should say that we are all implicated in Jesus’ death by our own sin, by our own against-ness toward God and our neighbor. This is what sin is, and you and I are sinners. We all have made a choice for God; we’ve chosen to drive the nails into his wrists and we’ve chosen to press the crown of thorns into his head.

It’s easy to forget this and become the religious people using religion against people. Self-righteousness always lurks. Christie and I visited Fitz Allison last week at his home in South Carolina. He is the retired Bishop of South Carolina. As you walk into his home the first thing you notice is a plumb line hanging from the second story ceiling down in front of the wide center staircase to the front hall. He put it there 15 years ago after hearing a sermon about the prophet Amos and his plumb line. The plumb line represents God’s righteousness; during the sermon Fitz was convicted of his own self-righteousness. He went home, put up the plumb line and said, “That plumb line will stay in this house until the last shred of self-righteousness is gone.”

The plumb line is still there. I saw it last Tuesday. Most people need a plumb line for every house. This is because we are sinners, whether we are bishops, 8 year old boys, or young married couples, synagogue leaders, or women bound by Satan for 18 years.

And yet, the gospel is the gospel: Jesus Christ died for sinners. Jesus Christ died for you. And if God is for you, who can be against you? Amen.