



A Lesson for Life

John 15: 9-17

©Rev. Joyce Shin
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I am going to read to you a story written by cultural anthropologist David Graeber. It is a story about bureaucracy. Perhaps some of you will be able to relate to it:

In 2006, my mother had a series of strokes. It soon became obvious that she would eventually be incapable of living at home without assistance. Since her insurance would not cover home care, a series of social workers advised us to put in for Medicaid. To qualify for Medicaid, however, one's total worth can only amount to six thousand dollars. We arranged to transfer her savings - this was, I suppose, technically a scam, though it's a peculiar sort of scam since the government employs thousands of social workers whose main work seems to involve telling citizens exactly how to perpetuate said scam - but shortly thereafter, she had another, very serious stroke, and found herself in a nursing home undergoing long-term rehabilitation. When she emerged from that, she was definitely going to need home care, but there was a problem: her social security check was being deposited directly, and she was barely able to sign her name, so unless I acquired power of attorney over her account and was thus able to pay her monthly rent bills for her, the money would immediately build up and disqualify her, even after I filled out the enormous raft of Medicaid documents I needed to file to qualify her for pending status.

I went to her bank, picked up the requisite forms, and brought them to the nursing home. The documents needed to be notarized. The nurse on the floor informed me there was an in-house notary, but I needed to make an appointment; she picked up the phone and put me through to a disembodied voice, who then transferred me to the notary. The notary proceeded to inform me I first had to get authorization from the head of social work, and hung up. So I acquired his name and room number and duly took the elevator downstairs and appeared at his office - only to discover that the head of social work was, in fact, the disembodied voice that had referred me to the notary in the first place. The head of social work picked up the phone, said, "Marjorie, that was me, you're driving this man crazy with this nonsense and you're driving me crazy, too," and, after a small apologetic gesture, proceeded to secure me an appointment for early the next week.

The next week the notary duly appeared, accompanied me upstairs, made sure I'd filled out my side of the form (as had been repeatedly emphasized to me), and then, in my mother's absence, proceeded to fill out her own. I was a little puzzled that she didn't ask my mother to sign anything, only me, but I figured that she knew what she was doing. The next day I took the document to the bank, where the woman at the desk took one look, asked why mother hadn't signed it, and showed it to her manager, who told me to take it back and do it right. So I got a new set of forms, duly filled out my side of each, and made a new appointment. On the appointed day the notary appeared, and . . . she took me upstairs. I signed, my mother signed - with some difficulty. She was finding it hard at this point even to prop herself up. And the next day I returned to the bank. Another woman at a different desk examined the forms and asked why I had signed the line where it said to write my name and printed my name on the line where it said to sign.

"I did? Well, I just did exactly what the notary told me to do."

“But it clearly says ‘signature’ here.”

“Oh, yes, it does, doesn’t it? I guess she told me wrong. Again. Well . . . all this information is still there, isn’t it? It’s just those two bits that are reversed. So is that really a problem? The situation is kind of pressing, and I’d really rather not have to wait to make another appointment.”

“Well, normally we don’t even accept these forms without all the signatories being here in person.”

“My mother had a stroke. She’s bedridden. That’s why I need power of attorney in the first place.”

She said she’d check with the manager, and after ten minutes returned, the manager hanging just within earshot in the background, to announce the bank could not accept the forms in their present state - and in addition, even if they were filled out correctly, I would still need a letter from my mother’s doctor certifying that she was mentally competent to sign such a document.

I pointed out that no one had mentioned any such letter previously.

“What?” the manager suddenly interjected. “Who gave you those forms and didn’t tell you about the letter?”

Since the culprit was one of the more sympathetic bank employees, I dodged the question, noting instead that in the bankbook it was printed, quite clearly, “in trust for David Graeber.” He of course replied that would only matter if she was dead.

As it happened, the whole problem soon became academic: my mother did indeed die a few weeks later.

David Graeber is a cultural anthropologist, and as such he has studied rituals that are socially efficacious, by which he means those acts “of saying or doing something that make it socially true” (*The Utopia of Rules*, 50). For example, births and deaths are not mere physical, biological, events. They are, we would say, spiritual events. Cultural anthropologists would say they are also social events, with rituals surrounding them by which social relationships are established, rearranged, or ended. When David Graeber’s mother passed away, he learned what many of you have learned, that the paperwork, sometimes years of paperwork, is what, in the eyes of society, actually effects the change.

When I was recently in Israel with an interfaith group of Jewish rabbis and Christian pastors, one of the people we heard from was Mahmoud Muna, a Palestinian bookseller living in East Jerusalem. The family-owned bookstore he manages is called the English Educational Bookshop; it was the first bookstore that sold books in English by Palestinians and about the Palestinian viewpoint. His family’s mission, the mission of the bookstore, is to reinforce Palestinian culture and identity. Mahmoud Muna spoke to us about the lack of leadership and representation in all other realms - the political, religious, and civic. As he sees it, culture is the last realm in which Palestinians in Jerusalem can resist. To give us a sense of what life is like for a Palestinian living in East Jerusalem, he laid out the marathon of bureaucracy that a Palestinian is made to go through for something as slight as paying a parking ticket. It was not unlike the story about bureaucracy recited by David Graeber.

On our trip we also met together with Dr. Mashhour Abudaka, the Minister of Technology for the Palestinian Authority, and Gai Hetzroni, an Israeli executive of the high-tech company Sysco. The two men have been working together to create opportunities for Palestinians living in occupied territories to work in high-tech industries. Arriving late to our meeting, Dr. Abudaka apologized, and his Israeli colleague explained that it is impossible to predict how much time it will take a Palestinian to get through security check points. Living in Ramallah, Dr. Abudaka daily gives himself an extra two hours to cross the check points, and even so,

one cannot be certain that he will make it on time to meetings that take place in Israel. One of the reasons why the high-tech industry is an optimal industry for Palestinians to enter is that, given the internet, there is less need to transport products or people across checkpoints.

Many of the stories we heard about Palestinian existence had to do with bureaucracy, hours of bureaucracy that have been imposed upon the daily lives of Palestinians and that Jewish Israelis do not experience. These stories were never the main point of the speakers from whom we heard; they are illustrative, however, of the structural violence that underlies the Palestinian existence. They are illustrative of what cultural anthropologist David Graeber identifies in his book *The Utopia of Rules*. David Graeber argues that bureaucratic procedures are invariably ways of managing social situations founded on structural violence, by which he means forms of pervasive social inequality that are ultimately backed up by the threat of force. Bureaucracy is created to manage such situations of structural violence.

Now, I am not convinced that all bureaucracy backs up structurally violent social situations, and I am not interested in being persuaded on this point. Nevertheless, there is a limit to how much bureaucracy we find tolerable. If we were to put it in the best light possible, most of us would probably think of bureaucracy as a necessary evil, necessary for fairness and objectivity. We need procedures to ensure that, no matter who you are, you will be treated procedurally just like anyone else will be treated. We suspect, however, that this is not really how the world works. We suspect that there are ways to get around bureaucracy and that bureaucracy itself, and this is Graeber's point, can be set up to treat people unfairly. In the case of the Palestinian people, I think we see this happening.

Though in some situations bureaucracy is necessary and can be good, in some situations it can be a hindrance to building the kind of beloved community that is envisioned by Jesus. We may think that, in addition to the issue of fairness, part of the problem that bureaucracy is designed to address has to do with scale. There is a difference in scale between the inner circle of disciples and the larger community of converts and potential converts. As the early church grew and as Jesus imagined the gospel spreading to the ends of the earth, we may think that scale, of course, would make a difference. Whereas it is easy to imagine what it could concretely look like for the intimate band of Jesus's disciples to live out the new commandment to love one another as Jesus loved them, would love on a larger, more public scale, require bureaucracy?

In her book entitled *Becoming Wise*, journalist Krista Tippett has written a chapter on love. Over the years of broadcasting her radio program "On Being," she has interviewed so many public figures who have spoken in one way or another about love as a public, not just a private, good that she has tried to make sense of their reflections in this chapter. She notes that whereas we have begun to name hate in public life, even creating a new legal category for hate crimes in which tolerance has totally broken down, we struggle to name love in public life. Having so privatized love, having so contained it in family and friendships, we have impoverished its potential for shaping our public world. In public life, we tend to use words like tolerance and fairness, not love. And yet, more than tolerance and fairness, love has potential to cross tribal lines in all kinds of ways and to create a beloved community. In her interview of civil rights leader Congressman John Lewis, Krista Tippett asked Congressman Lewis to speak about the potential of love to shape our public life. "The Civil Rights Movement, above all," he says, "was a work of love. Yet even 50 years later, it is rare to find anyone who would use the word love to describe what we did" (Tippett, 112, citing Lewis in *Across That Bridge*). He described

the weeks and months, before any sit-in or march or ride, when they studied the Bible and Gandhi, Aristotle and Thoreau. They internalized practical, physical disciplines of courtesy and conduct - kindness, eye contact, coat and tie, dresses, no unnecessary words. . . . They engaged in intense role-playing - "social drama" - whites putting themselves in the role of blacks being harassed, black activists putting themselves in the shoes of policemen feeling threatened and under order to gain control (Tippett, 110).

Love in the Civil Rights Movement was work. It was the painstaking work of overcoming grievance and violence (Tippett, 110).

Like any work should, love should bear fruit, fruit that is visible and lasting. Using the organic image of vine, branch, and fruit, Jesus speaks about the beloved community as being the fruit that Christian love should bear. In chapter 15 of the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples: "Go and bear fruit."

I am the vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. . . . Abide in my love.

Drawing on Jesus' imagery, the great Reformer Martin Luther would often say that you can identify a good tree only by the fruit that it bears. While a bad tree bears bad fruit, a good tree bears good fruit.

In her famous book *Out of Africa*, author Karen Blixen wrote about her midlife move to Kenya. Marrying there and boldly striking out on her own, she buys a coffee plantation in the bush and hires local tribesmen and women to work the plantation. One morning a young man named Kitau comes to her door, asking if she might give him a job working in the house. Karen agrees, and soon she comes to rely on him, for he becomes the best employee she could imagine - hard working, diligent, honest, responsible. At the end of three months, Kitau comes to Karen and asks to be released from his job. He would like a letter of recommendation to Sheik Ali bin Salim, a Muslim living in a nearby town. Surprised and disappointed to lose him, Karen asks Kitau why he is leaving. She asks him what she can do to keep him from going. Would he stay if she offered him a raise? Kitau's response surprises her even further. He is not interested in money. He had been trying to decide whether to become a Christian or a Muslim. That is why he came to work for Karen, a Christian, and now he would go work for the Sheik, a Muslim. Then he would make a choice.

As Jesus prepares his disciples to carry out a worldwide mission, he gives them a new commandment that can be lived out no matter the scale: to love. Love is not just a private feeling, tucked in our hearts. Love is public, because its fruits are visible for others to see. A beloved community, a community of friends, these are the visible, public fruits of love. Jesus does not give us a long list of rules and procedures follow, i's to dot and t's to cross. He gives us only this one rule: to love one another as he has loved us. "By this," he tells us, "everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."