

Rules that Keep You Unhealthy: Part 1

Have you ever taken note of just how many times Jesus breaks the rules? I don't think he was just being disrespectful or rude. Rather, I believe that Jesus was able to identify rules that tended to keep people unhealthy and he intentionally broke those rules so that those in bondage might be free.

Robert Subby and John Friel recognized that in families where there is alcoholism or drug abuse or an inappropriate behavioral secret, a set of rules would be put in place around the sickness. In their observation, the rules were as much of a hindrance to health as the problem. In fact, it was the set of rules that kept the family unhealthy and that got passed on from generation to generation even when the "ism" didn't.

Subby and Friel have identified eight rules that are most common in our lives that keep us unhealthy. I first read their work almost 20 years ago. I realized then how these rules are not only in families. They are in our congregations and, in fact, ingrained in our cultures. The further you go north on the European continent, the deeper the rules are acculturated. Guess what that means for us Lutherans? For us Wisconsinites, how many of the families in our congregations have been affected by alcoholism and how many bring the unhealthy rules to bear on congregational life?

Over the next couple of months my articles will focus on these rules, reflecting on how they might be active in our congregations, keeping us from the full health God intends.

The first rule is to keep us unhealthy is "It is not okay to talk about problems." This is known as the "don't talk" rule. This rule guides many of our congregations. We can't tell the congregation how bad off

we are financially. We can't discuss how over-worked pastors and staff might be. We can't imagine raising the issue of the organist who has been faithful for 35 years but is now a few beats behind. "No, we don't have any problems here." The denial of problems, the fear of talking about them creates a numbness over the entire congregation. If you can't be honest about the lows, pretty soon you are afraid to celebrate the highs. It is not long and the congregation is feeling like a waiting room in a hospital. The heart monitor is flat-lining. If people seem guarded and as though they are walking on egg shells, then this rule is most likely in effect. If people run out of church with little or no socializing, chances are they are working hard to break this rule. Jesus talked to the woman at the well. He told her her life's story; she had had five husbands and the man with whom she was now living was not her husband. Jesus broke the rule on her behalf and talked about her problems. She was not offended. To the contrary, she found in his confrontation great freedom. She in turn goes into the village and invites all to come and see; to be vulnerable with their problems for greater health. (John 4:7-29.)

To become healthier, congregations must break this "don't talk" rule; they must begin to talk openly about the problems they are facing. As this rule is broken it is necessary for good health to have other healthy rules in place. Healthy rules will set appropriate boundaries around how members treat one another and how they talk to one another with respect, courtesy and love. Keep in mind that the problems are almost never one person. Therefore, we talk about the problems, about the behaviors and attitudes that perpetuate the problem. We must not personify the problem as being one person. And we try to see in the problem the opportunity that God is placing before us. For improved congregational health, create an atmosphere where problems and challenges facing the congregation can be addressed openly.