

Isaiah 58:9b-14; Psalm 103:1-8;
Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

Grace to you all and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have a question for you: How do you feel rules? Personally, I like them. It makes the complexity of life a whole lot simpler. If you had to consider all the moral and social implications of everything that you were going to do before you do it, you might never get anything done. That's why we have laws in our society, so that we have order and the things that are allowed and not allowed have been thought out ahead of time. And beyond that, we have rules that guide our daily living. You probably have some that you don't even think about.

For instance, do you eat in your car? For me, I do not. I would not even drink in my car. If you want to keep your car looking nice on the inside, you don't want crumbs, spills or empty food containers in it. This rule has always been a point of contention in my family. You see, for me, a car is not a dining room. I have a dining room in my house, and there are ample restaurants and picnic areas in the world, places where food is served and cleaned up efficiently. I don't need to eat in my car. But as I said, this is a point of contention in my family. We have some who think it's okay to eat on the run. In fact one member of my family is a master at holding a biggie drink between his knees while eating a bag of french fries. Needless to say, his car has many stains on the carpet and there are frequently petrified french fries under the seat. He sees nothing wrong here. And it drives me crazy. He thinks that I'm obsessed with rules. I think he's a slob.

Both of us are bound up in rules, or the apparent lack them, in our lives. And today's gospel at first glance seems to be that same kind of argument. At one level we have this woman who has had an ailment for some time; in fact, she's been suffering with it for eighteen years. She's in the synagogue and Jesus heals her, and the leader of the synagogue questions this action. After all it is the Sabbath, and there are certain rules about the Sabbath. And is this so unreasonable? Most of our doctors are not working today on this Christian Sabbath day. We have emergency rooms, and we have beepers. In fact, there are probably some doctors that have beepers in this service, and if they go off, they'll have to deal with that emergency.

But I wonder what their reaction would be if they got this call: "Excuse me doctor, I'm sorry to bother you. I know it's Sunday, but I have this pain in my back. I've had it for the last eighteen years, and I was wondering if you could look at it today." Maybe I'm wrong, but I'm guessing that this would not be viewed as an emergency.

Isn't that what it seems the synagogue leader is saying to this itinerant preacher? We have some rules here. We treat people on six days, but not on the Sabbath day. We have rules. But, the reality in this very brief story is loaded with a lot more than that.

You see, the woman did not come to Jesus in the story, Jesus saw her, and he called to her. Do you think anyone else saw her? She was a woman, little more than property in Jewish society, and she was crippled. She was scorned in that society, and yet Jesus called her over. She says nothing, but he says, "You have been set free from your ailment."

You have been set free. This is the Jesus who began his ministry in Galilee in a synagogue when he read from Isaiah "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of the sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free." Jesus has done what God sent him to do – he has freed the oppressed.

The leader of the synagogue questions his actions, but the way he does it is interesting. Luke writes this in a way to make it clear to us that there is more going on here. First we need to be reminded that in the previous chapter, Chapter 12, the last time that Jesus spoke about synagogues to the disciples, he said to the disciples, "When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say." So as Jesus and the leader of the synagogue are speaking, we the readers of Luke's gospel know that Jesus is guided by the Holy Spirit. And the leader of the synagogue did not take Jesus aside to talk to him about this, but he uses an address to the entire crowd to put Jesus on the spot. He uses some very interesting language when he speaks; he says, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, but not on the Sabbath day." The expression "ought to be done" can be translated, "it is God's will". What he's saying is, there are six days that work is done, according to God's will, and I know God's will. But Luke makes it really clear that in this conversation about the very will of God who really understands that, because the scripture doesn't say "Jesus answered him", for the first time in the story, it says, "The Lord answered him . . ." and Luke is making it crystal clear that this isn't about rules, it's about the will of God. Jesus says, don't you loosen or set free your animals on the Sabbath so that they can drink? And ought not this woman – it's the same language that the leader used. Jesus is saying, "Is it not God's will that this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on this Sabbath day?"

Isn't this what God truly wants? Not a rigid obsession and worry about rules, but for her to be set free on this day. And what's the woman's reaction to this liberation that she did not even ask of Jesus? She begins to praise God. Why? Because she knew the source of her liberation: it was a gift from God. And so, who remains bound in this story? The leader of the synagogue. He is bound to the rules, convinced that they are God's will. But Jesus teaches that the Sabbath is for our liberation. It is an opportunity for us to set aside the things that bind us when we can be set free.

So, what binds us? What are the kinds of things that bind you? There are many difficult things in our lives – alcoholism, drug abuse, prejudice, social injustice – that plague our society and I am certain that most of us, in some way, have been touched by those things. And yet, I also meet people who are obsessed with worry and concern, concerns about pretty much everything.

I know a woman who lives by my mom who is bound up by the Weather Channel. Oh don't get me wrong, I think the Weather Channel is a gift from God. Eight days ago it accurately warned us to leave North Carolina (which we did) and Hurricane Charley came in right behind us. My mother's friend, she watches all the time. And when there was a tornado in Pennsylvania, she called my mom because she knew that she had a son who lived in Pennsylvania, and she could not rest from worry until my mom called to find out how we were from the tornado that wasn't actually anywhere near our home. She couldn't stop worrying about it, even though she has never even met us. She is obsessed, literally bound up, by the Weather Channel.

So, should we not watch the Weather Channel? No. It's a gift that keeps us free from our worries. God has given us ways to keep us safe in the world, and we're called to use these gifts, but not to obsess about them. Are you worried that the church will burn down on a Sunday morning? Well, conducting a drill and knowing what to do are the things that will keep us safe. So we can set that worry aside and focus on what God calls us to focus on.

So what are you worried about? What binds you up today? The weather? Fire? Coffee spills on the floor mats of your car? This is the Lord's day, and God desires that the burden you carry be put down. And in fact, God is saying to you that you have been freed. It is the freedom that we have in the promise of Jesus Christ. In that freedom, we come here this day and praise God for all that God has done and continues to do for. On this day we put aside our own interests, we put aside our worries. It is what Isaiah said today as well – "If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the LORD."

Our delight is setting our own concerns, setting them aside and focusing on the fact that God has set this day for our freedom. It is for freedom, not independence, but rather recognizing our dependence on the one who created heaven and earth, the one that sustains us and cares for us, the one who frees us from the things that trap us and worry us. God's third Commandment is to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. What Jesus tells us today, is that it is God's way of setting us free. May we all find God's freedom this Sabbath day.

Amen.