

Luke 13:10-17

Everybody enjoys a day off when they can get it, right? Some of us like to plan our days off so we can do things we are unable to during normal business hours. Some of us like to NOT plan anything but leisure time, down time, rest, relax and recharge. The thoughts of work are set aside (hopefully). The very notion of work interfering with our day off is unsavory, at best, infuriating at worst. All it takes is a phone call or an email, and a day off can turn into just another work day. And we feel cheated! "But, it's my day off!"

So, when is the Church's day off? All you need do is take one look at the weekly schedule in your bulletin to see that here at Trinity, it sometimes seems like the "city that never sleeps!" I don't bring this up because I've been here a mere 5 weeks and I'm feeling overworked. In these eight short verses, Luke used the word Sabbath FIVE times. Apparently it was REALLY important for Luke's audience to remember the Sabbath. In a sense, the Sabbath was a "day off."

Honoring the rest taken after Creation, God gave us the Sabbath, a day of no work, in order to restore and refresh ourselves and our relationships with one another and God. But we like rules. In an effort to be clear on what "no work" on the Sabbath meant, the religious leaders continued to refine the criteria, turning the Sabbath observance more into a list of what you can't do rather than what is permissible; things like not kindling a fire in your dwelling (Ex. 35.3) or not even gathering sticks (Num. 15.32). And the penalty for violating the Sabbath was death. That much is absolutely clear. Yes, the Sabbath is about resting from labor, but it's not about laziness.

Unfortunately, the synagogue leader is easily painted as a bad guy in this story. All he's doing is reacting to a breaking of boundaries that had been kept since the Exodus some 1200-1300 years prior. In my ears and mind, when I read and hear this text, it seems the leader of the synagogue is responding in much the same way about it being a non-work day as we might. But, I'm getting ahead of the text just a bit.

On the way toward Jerusalem and ultimately the cross in Luke's gospel, this is the last time Jesus is indicated to be teaching in the synagogue. That he heals someone, in the synagogue, on the Sabbath is also not unprecedented by this point of Luke's text. He cast out an unclean spirit on one occasion and cured a man's withered hand on another. What is different with this particular story is the unassuming woman, bent and bound for 18 years. We can ask so many questions about her of the text, about her personal circumstances and history, married, widowed, faithful or not, old or young, siblings, etc. We can make a number of presumptions and read them back into our understanding of the text. But for Luke, his original hearers and us, we can be satisfied with the fact that she is a woman, hovering at the edges of the scene, already low-status by her gender, rendered

unclean by the presence of a spirit, virtually unnoticed by all, except Jesus. She suddenly becomes an uncomfortable interruption to our learning and meditation.

As worshippers and leaders, we may have all had an experience where our calm, comfortable worship was disrupted by a sudden outburst from an unknown visitor. With a mixture of shock and anger, we wonder, "How could somebody be so ignorant?" But, have we ever been unnerved, unsettled by the quiet, withdrawn nameless stranger who causes no disruption at all?

We might read the woman in the story merely figuratively, or her physical deformity as a symbol of how people may be beaten down by their circumstances when they come to worship. Of course, medical science and our 21st Century minds scoff at the explanation that she had a spirit. We would never confess to our neighbors or closest friends, perhaps not even our own family members that our ailments are attributable to spirits.

As we prepare for worship, what "spirits" are keeping us bound, bent over, unable to straighten and praise God? Threat of job or home loss? Grieving the passing of a loved one? Recent medical diagnoses? Broken family relationships? Anything that keeps us separated from full participation with our faith communities.

It doesn't seem that the woman in the story expected to encounter God's grace that day. Do WE come expecting to encounter God's grace in such a direct manner? Is the fact that we've left too many weeks in a row NOT feeling like we've encountered God in worship causing us to be numb, inattentive, wondering why we keep dragging ourselves to church, so beat down...bent over...weak.

Whether or not it was her first time at the synagogue, it seems the woman recognized that it was the Sabbath, and aware of her status, knew she could not approach Jesus. It's no shock to anyone that she is passing through the scene.

What IS shocking is that Jesus calls her to himself. A woman. With a spirit. In the middle of teaching.

That Jesus would disrupt teaching to address her was already enough to set people on edge and make them take notice of her, even if they didn't wish to. Jesus moves to action before a single objection can be raised. He does not engage the leaders in debate or discussion as to whether or not something should be done about the woman's ailment. Without explanation or fanfare, Jesus speaks a word of release to the woman as he places his hands on her. Release. Not healing. Not spirit removal. Release. Just as he had read and promised from the Isaiah scroll in his first Sabbath/synagogue appearance earlier in the 4th chapter of Luke.

The reactions are instant and they are polarizing. For the woman she immediately praises God. You can find her words in the African American Spiritual contained in our hymnals, "I'm So Glad, Jesus Lifted Me, Satan had me bound, when I was in trouble, Jesus lifted ME.

Glory Hallelujah!"⁺ On the other side of the scene stands the leader, "**Do not arouse the wrath of the great and powerful [God]. I said come back tomorrow.**"^{*}

He does not object to the woman being restored, but rather to the breaching of what to him are sacred, God-given boundaries that he has the position and responsibility to uphold. This is his business, so to speak. He knows when "normal business hours" are to be observed. He knows the "day off." His response is akin to a pastor or lay-leader saying, "The church is only interested and able to help you between the hours of 9am and 5pm, Monday through Friday. Please stop back then." It seems he would have been perfectly happy to have seen her healed on any other given day, EXCEPT for the fact that it had already been 18 years of "normal business hours" and the woman was still bound and bent. Rather than address Jesus directly, the leader attempts to sway the gathered crowd to back him in condemning Jesus' act. And surely, Jesus COULD have helped her any other day and avoided this whole scene. But he didn't.

So, is Jesus saying the Sabbath isn't important? Of course not. Jesus fulfilled the Law completely. He is upholding exactly what Isaiah was preaching about not trampling. There's no self-interest in helping the woman. Jesus eradicates using the Sabbath as an excuse for not responding to the needs of individuals, of communities who are in some way bound and unable to free themselves. The Sabbath, as any other day, is always an opportunity for God's compassion, mercy, love to be revealed.

As claimed and gathered Christ-followers, called through our baptisms to continue Jesus' mission of releasing captives, freeing the oppressed and proclaiming God's good news, we ARE to be mindful in our observation of Sabbath time, whatever day that becomes for us. Jesus knew that if he worked within the established religious framework, the radical nature of his life and mission would never be fully understood. It was not something that could be simply debated for or against at a council or committee meeting. It took action, rooted in mercy and love.

Every day can't be the Sabbath, but neither can every Sabbath be an excuse for ignoring another brother or sister, and seeking to release them from whatever spirit is keeping them from restoration: to their own sense of identity and dignity, to their full participation in the life of the community.

That's not to say the Sabbath should be spent laboriously hunting down such persons and opportunities, but our sensitivities and awareness need heightened to notice them when they present themselves in our midst, no matter where we are, even if they are quietly, unassumingly skirting along the edges.

And when God's amazing, unexpected grace is manifested in our midst, through us or in us, we sing, "Glory! Hallelujah! Jesus lifted me!"

⁺ ELW 860

^{*} Appropriated from *The Wizard of Oz*.

Amen.

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