

Today’s lesson is read from Luke 13:10-17

Hear the words from Luke:

Read Luke 13:10-17

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

Gracious God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Have you ever had a back injury so painful it kept you up at night? I remember not too long ago I sustained a back injury from doing squats at the gym with poor form. I admit I was being lazy and using my back instead of my legs. Later that night my back muscles had tightened and twisted and the pain was so excruciating that I spent the entire night on the floor with my hands behind my back working out the knots. By the morning my knuckles and my back had bruised a gnarly purple. It was anything I could do to sit up straight or to take a step walking without feeling any pain. So this morning, I can sympathize with the bent over woman.

Luke tells us that by the time the bent over woman encounters Jesus, she’s been crippled for eighteen years. I wonder if she showed up for worship every weekend during those exhausting two decades. I wonder if anyone noticed her. I wonder what hope or meaning or comfort the weekly Saturday worship afforded her — if any. I wonder what sort of life she shuffled home to, afterwards. The Gospels never tell us, but we know this woman even if we’ve never met her.

According to the text, the woman doesn’t ask Jesus for help when she appears in the synagogue on the particular Sabbath day in question. He’s teaching — most likely surrounded by a crowd. She doesn’t approach him. Who knows if she even notices him,

bent over as she is? But he sees her. He sees her. When he calls her over and she approaches, he puts his sermon on hold, and says the thing Jesus always says in the Gospels when he encounters the sick, the broken, the dying, and the dead: “You are set free from your ailment.” Then, the Gospel tells us, Jesus “laid his hands on her, and immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.”

After this we are told the leader of the synagogue becomes outraged by Jesus’ healing. Why the outrage? Well unfortunately, the Gospel story itself offers the answer. As soon as Jesus unbinds the crippled woman, the leader of the synagogue voices his displeasure. Essentially, his angry criticism drowns out her joyful praise saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done, come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.”

In other words, the leader protests because Jesus disrupts the regular Sabbath schedule of the synagogue. Jesus messes with tradition. Worse, he places a socially expendable, physically disabled, spiritually vulnerable woman at the center of the tradition. Jesus allows the woman's need to interrupt his own sermon, and welcomes her praise song even though it messes with the synagogue's order of service.

To be clear, though, the leader of the synagogue is not a “bad guy.” His intentions are not evil, and his concerns are not without merit. He cares about right worship. Right belief. Right practice. He cares about honoring the Sabbath, obeying God’s laws, and upholding the faith-filled traditions of his spiritual community. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these goals.

But what the leader misses is the heart of the Sabbath, the heart of God’s law, the heart of the tradition. What the leader misses is compassion. The kind of compassion that

trumps legalism (the way things are) every single time. The kind of compassion that doesn't cling to belief simply for belief's sake. The kind of compassion that consistently sees the broken body, the broken soul, the broken spirit — before it sees the broken commandment.

Instead of rejoicing that the woman had been healed after such a long illness, they were furious and they accused Jesus of breaking the Law. The Jewish religious leaders condemned Jesus' actions. To them the Law (not working on the Sabbath) was more important than the needs of people.

If I asked you by a show of hands whether, it is more important to keep the Sabbath day holy by not doing any work – or to do some good work on the Sabbath day such as healing – I am pretty confident that all of you here would say it's OK to work/heal on the Sabbath. You'd probably even go further and say that it is our Christian obligation and responsibility to do so.

However, the answer is not as simple nor as clear-cut as I believe it is for most of us here today. I'm guessing that most of you spent your Sunday's involving church, family, and food. That was the norm then. Perhaps some of you came from households where cheerful activities were prohibited the entire weekend. If you were a Seventh-day Adventist the Sabbath began at sunset on Friday and ended at sunset on Saturday. If you were a staunch Methodist the Sabbath began Saturday at midnight and ended Sunday at midnight. God bless you if your mother was a Seventh-day-Adventist and your father was a Methodist! That meant you endured two Sabbaths, and during that time you weren't allowed to do anything! No studying, no fishing, no playing, no shopping, no gardening, no dancing, no TV. All of that was considered work and was prohibited!

Many of you may remember when stores were closed on Sundays. Salespeople had a day off, and no business was transacted. Perhaps you recall times and places when it was impossible to buy alcohol on Sunday.

All of these customs originated from people's ideas about how to obey the Fourth Commandment: as recorded in Exodus 20:8 (KJV) says: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.”

In Deuteronomy a different reason is given: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." The Sabbath was meant to be a gift, a time of rest and restoration, a time to worship God. But quickly that gift turned into Law, and all sorts of rules grew up about what was work and what wasn't, what it was permissible to do on the Sabbath and what was not. Keeping the Sabbath holy also meant reserving that day for worship of God, and, as you might guess, people had various ideas about what constituted worship and, therefore, exactly what kept the Sabbath “holy”.

Jesus and his disciples were constantly getting into trouble with the religious authorities for not properly observing the Sabbath. The issue comes up four times in Luke, and three of these controversies involve healing on the Sabbath. So the very minute

when Jesus sees the crippled woman he sees an opportunity not only to heal and straighten her deformed back, but also a chance to heal and straighten the deformation of what the Sabbath has become.

What Jesus does for the woman is set her free from the torture and imprisonment of her own body. Jesus gives her a new life, free from pain, free from shame, free from isolation. Jesus restores to the woman her dignity, her sense of self-worth, her place in the community, and her very identity. No longer simply a cripple, she is, as Jesus calls her, a proud daughter of Abraham, heir of God's promise, and participant in God's covenant. Jesus reaches out to this outcast, this woman whose everyday life is worse than death, touches her, and gives her the wholeness, health, and peace that God always intended people to have. And she didn't have to do anything. What Jesus does for the woman is a gift; it is pure grace. It is a glimpse of the Resurrection. It is love made realized. When Jesus touches the woman, she immediately stands up straight and tall for the first time in 18 years, and she begins to praise God. She knows the source of her healing. So on the Sabbath she praises God for this unexpected, wonderful, unbelievable gift of life, a gift of resurrection.

This story — like so many Gospel stories — illustrates a basic truth about God's invading kingdom: the kingdom doesn't care about our timing, or our meaning of manners, or our obsession with politeness and etiquette, or how we define Sabbath. The kingdom cares about love. It cares about love NOW.

Jesus demonstrated to the crowd that keeping the Sabbath holy was not about observing rules and "thou shalt nots." Keeping the Sabbath holy was about worshiping God by releasing people from bondage and giving them new lives so that they, too, can

praise God. That's what God had done for the Israelites when he led them out of Egypt. So in a very clear way, by healing the crippled woman on the Sabbath, Jesus is keeping, not breaking, the third commandment. And that's what Jesus did for you and me when, out of love, he died on the cross and rose again, releasing all those who believe in him from the bondage of sin and giving them new lives. Like the bent-over woman, we did not even have to ask for this gift. It is pure grace. And having received the gift, we are freed to thank and praise God with so much enthusiasm that crowds cannot help but join in.

So how do we keep the Sabbath holy today? How do we worship God in the 21st century? The ways we used to keep the Sabbath are long gone. On Sundays now, we work, we shop, we play sports or watch them on TV, we do everything that we do on any other day. With our busy schedules, our desire to spend time with the family, and our focus on having as much fun and free time as we can, we struggle with honoring the Sabbath and using the day to worship God.

Few of us would want to return to a world full of strict rules about how to observe the Sabbath--even if we could. And, yes, it is often tempting to join the crowds of people for whom Sunday is no different from any day. Yet the very fact that we do come to worship says that we are looking for something more, that we are looking for ways to keep the Sabbath holy and to thank and praise God.

So we gather together to tell and to hear the story of God's love for us. We experience that love, given to us in the form of bread and wine, which joins us to God and to each other, and to all Christians in every time and every place. We rejoice in God's graciousness and give thanks for His gifts. And we also give money for ministries here

and around the globe that bring people freedom from poverty and illness and bondage.

We donate food for the hungry. We share our time and talents on projects that demonstrate God's care for this world.

We praise God and we serve our neighbor. We thank God by loving our neighbor. As Jesus taught us, that's how we keep the Sabbath holy and that's how we worship God. Let us pray:

Dear Jesus, we give you praise this morning that you see us. That you have always seen us. That you know and have seen our crippled stature. We are in awe of you and what you did for us on the cross so that we too may be restored to stand tall. And in standing tall may we take every step in this life rejoicing in the promises you keep. Let us keep the Sabbath holy today and the next day and the next day and the next day as we praise you in all we do, so that others may know of your Kingdom revealed here on earth. Amen.

Commission & Benediction:

Go now to speak the words God gives you
to all those to whom God sends you.

Offer your worship to God

with thanksgiving and with works of freedom and mercy.

And may God be your shelter to keep you safe;

May Christ Jesus set you free from all that cripples you;

And may the Holy Spirit be with you to deliver you

and to make you perfect with all God's faithful ones.

May we go in peace to love and serve the Lord,

Luke 13:10-17

“Straightening on the Sabbath”

August 25, 2019

In the name of Christ. Amen.