

Proper 16C 2019 Sermon

Luke 13:10-17

Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept 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." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Jesus is teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath; and a woman appears who has a spirit that has crippled her for eighteen years. She is “bent over and [is] quite unable to stand up straight.” One commentator ponders her condition, writing: “Over the years, she has become accustomed, if not resigned, to her long and serious illness... For eighteen years this unnamed woman must strain to see the sun, the sky, and the stars. For eighteen years she has become accustomed to looking down or just slightly ahead but never upward without difficulty. For eighteen years her world has been one of turning from side to side to see what those who stand upright can see with just a glance. She is used to this, and no one questions her fate. Instead, the leader of the synagogue gets offended that Jesus would heal on the Sabbath.”¹

Now before we immediately pounce on this seemingly hardhearted synagogue leader, let us remember that observing the Sabbath is one of the 10 Commandments – it’s a Biggie! Sabbath is a day of rest built into the very fabric of Creation – God worked for 6 days in creating the world, and on the 7th day, God rested; and so should God’s children. But observing the Sabbath is a commandment to which we Christians in America pay little heed; and we are the worse for it! For, without a time of rest in God, we easily lose any sense of our *identity* in God, our True Self; who we were created to be.

But there is *another* explanation in the Torah of **why** God commands observance of the Sabbath. It is based *not* on the 7th day of Creation, but rather on the release of the Jewish people from bondage in Egypt. In the Book of Deuteronomy, we read: “Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, **so that** your male and female

slave may rest as well as you. 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.” (Deut. 5:12-15)

This *second* explanation of the origin of the Sabbath is about release from bondage. When the Jews were slaves and resident aliens in Egypt, they **had** no day of rest; most slaves throughout history have not had any day of rest. The Sabbath day is given as a commandment and promise of rest for *all*: Rich or poor, slave or free, native Jew or resident alien, adult or child, human or animal, *everyone* needs a time to rest, and so God makes it a **commandment** to safeguard rest *for all*. Indeed, we read in Leviticus about a “Jubilee Year,” a Sabbath’s Sabbath, 7 times 7 years, a year in which all slaves are to be freed, and all debts are to be forgiven. (Lev. 25:8–13) Both the Sabbath and the Sabbath’s Sabbath are about freedom and release. And so, in today’s Gospel, Jesus asks the synagogue leader, “ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” The day for freedom and release?

The leader of the synagogue has forgotten the *reason* for the Sabbath law, the spirit behind the law, God’s purpose for the law. He believes that the law should be observed simply because it is the written law - period.

By now, the Lutherans among us have probably recognized Martin Luther’s signature theme: the difference between Law and Gospel. Luther, in interpreting St. Paul’s writings, saw that the Law functions first to organize societies and institutions (which is a good thing); but secondly, the Law functions to point out our failure, our inability to do the will of God or obey the commandments of God on our own. St. Paul wrote, “I don’t do the good I want to do. Instead, I do the evil that I *don’t* want to do.” (Romans 7:19) And in another place, Paul writes, “it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith; not by *anything* of your own, but by a gift from God; not by *anything* that you have done, so that nobody can claim the credit.” (Eph. 2:8, NJB)

And yet, do we not often rest secure in the idea that we are good people because we don’t break the law? And do we not, at times, justify our lack of compassion for someone because, after all, “they broke the law?” But does that make them any less beloved and valued by God than you or I? *Jesus* breaks the law many times over! In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus and his disciples are walking through a grain field and picking and eating the grain on a Sabbath, and some Pharisees ask Jesus, “Why are your disciples breaking the law by harvesting grain on the Sabbath?” And Jesus says to them, “The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27-28)

For Jesus, the Law is there to serve the needs of people; and when it *isn’t* fulfilling that purpose, Jesus has no qualms in breaking the *written* Law for the

sake of the *purpose* of the Law – namely, to meet the needs of people. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says six times in a row, “The law says, but I tell you...” (Matthew 5:21-45).

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr, who is enamored with St. Paul, writes: “Paul himself had been a man of the law, and he saw that it led him to ‘breathing threats to slaughter the Lord’s disciples’ (Acts 9:1). As he tells us in Philippians (3:4-6), Paul was a perfect law-abiding Pharisee: ‘As far as the Law can make you perfect, I was faultless,’ Paul says. He seems to wonder, ‘How could such perfect religious observance still create hateful and violent men like me?’ That was Paul’s utterly honest and humble question.”² Perhaps it is a question for our own day, also.

Fr. Rohr continues: “Laws can only give us *information*; they cannot give us *transformation* (Romans 3:20; 7:7-13). Laws can give us very good boundaries, but boundary-keeping of itself is a long way from love.

“Law is a necessary stage, but if we stay there, *Paul* believes, it actually becomes a major obstacle to transformation into love and mercy. Law often frustrates the process of transformation by becoming an end in itself. It inoculates us from the real thing, which is always relationship. Paul says that God gave us the law to show us that we can’t obey the law! (See Romans 7:7-13) [Martin Luther elaborated on that idea.] Paul even says that the written law brings death, and only the Spirit can bring life (Romans 7:5-6; 2 Corinthians 3:6). ...

“[U]ntil people have had some level of inner God experience,” Fr. Rohr continues, “...they will not be able to even understand the law’s meaning and purpose... Humans quite simply don’t have the power to obey **any** spiritual law, especially issues like forgiveness of enemies, nonviolence, self-emptying, humble use of power, true justice toward the outsider, and so on, *except in* and *through* union with God. Or as Jesus put it, ‘the branch cut off from the vine is useless.’ (John 15:5)”³

20th-Century Trappist monk and mystic Thomas Merton explained why clinging to the letter of the Law is more popular in our society than living by grace. He wrote: “So many Christians exalt the demands and rigors of law because, in reality, law is less demanding than pure charity.”⁴ Law is less demanding than pure charity.

Near the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, as Jesus is starting his ministry, he comes to his hometown of Nazareth and goes to the synagogue on a Sabbath. He stands up to read, is given the scroll of Isaiah, and he finds the place where it is written: “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 sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:16-21) In his hometown synagogue, on the sabbath, Jesus

chooses to read a message about freedom and release, which, according to Deuteronomy, is the very *meaning* of the sabbath. And how do the townspeople respond? They are enraged, and try to throw him off a cliff. The spirit of the Lord is upon Jesus; but the law is less demanding.

My friends, Jesus' sabbath message of freedom and release is a message meant for you and me, also! For we, too, like the woman in our Gospel, can so easily get bent over by cares and worries and sickness and old age and anger and depression and what have you. We, too, can become accustomed, if not resigned, to our less-than-healthy, less-than-whole condition. We, too, can find ourselves focused in a downward direction, never looking up to see the sun, the sky, and the stars. And like the leader of the synagogue, we, too, can get stuck in the way we see the world, clinging to old certainties, rules, habits and mindsets, the letter of the law, and **judging** all those who, like Jesus, would *upset* these familiar certainties which have, for so long, formed our self-identity and the very ground on which we stand.

My friends, Merton was right: we can all-too-easily exalt the demands and rigors of law because law is less demanding than pure charity, less demanding than the Gospel. For you see, in the end, the leader of the synagogue, also, is bent over – not in body, but in spirit; bound and captive to a law devoid of its original intention: to free people from whatever it is that keeps them from the abundant life which Christ came to bring. But, my friends, God did not intend us to be bent down in body or in spirit. So strongly does Jesus want sabbath release and freedom for this woman and for each of us (for the woman represents all of us) that Jesus doesn't wait for the woman to ask to be healed. (Perhaps she *cannot* ask, so resigned has she become to being broken and bound.) Jesus takes the initiative, says to the woman (and to us), "You are set free," and if we have the courage to be open to God's healing, transforming love, we, too, will be enabled to stand up straight, freed from whatever has bent us over and has kept us captive for so very long.

AMEN

1 Emilie M. Townes, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year C, Volume 3: Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1* (Prophets 3-16)

2 Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, "The Purpose of the Law," Monday, May 22, 2017

3 Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation, "Grace Must Win," Sunday, May 21, 2017

4 Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*