

Sermon: Sabbath Freedom
Scripture: Luke 13:10-17
Exodus 31:12-17; Mark 2:23-3:6

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Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ 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. ¹² **When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."** ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ 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." ¹⁵ 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?" ¹⁶ 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?" ¹⁷ 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.

Turn with me in your bibles if you will to Luke 13:10-17 as we begin our message today. We will be looking at this passage which is an object lesson by Jesus on the subject of the Sabbath. Theologian Paul Jewett states "Sabbath observance was the most prominent of all the demands which the law made upon the life of a Jew. Circumcision came once in a lifetime, the Sabbath once a week."¹ Of course the idea of the Sabbath traces its roots back to creation when God rested on the 7th day after speaking the creation into being on the first 6 days of recorded history. Sabbath observance is commanded in the law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai as a remembrance of God's creative activity, and by Exodus 31, which we also read this morning, we hear that observing the Sabbath is serious business – offenders are either to be put to death or at least cut off from the other people around

¹ Paul Jewett, The Lord's Day, p. 36.

them. Attendance would jump in most congregations if a similar policy were instituted today, don't you think?

Why such harsh words about a time set aside to rest and worship God? This seems to confirm the objections of those enemies of organized faith who characterize it as just a bunch of restrictions and negativity. But we have to remember God has good reasons for commanding his creation to act in certain ways. We ignore many of these instructions at our own peril as history has shown again and again. God is serious about the Sabbath because it is at the heart of who God is, who we are as God's creation, and how we are to live in proper relationship with the One who has created us and all things. We bought a new refrigerator not long ago. Of course, I read through the instruction manual when it was delivered and saw solemn warnings about ignoring certain instructions and the certain tragedy that would result with such behavior. The creator of the refrigerator knows how it is meant to work correctly and what will happen if the user ignores the instructions and just follows his own intuition. So the Creator of humanity knows how we are intended to work correctly in approaching life and what happens if and when we ignore those instructions. God wants his children to enter fully into the blessings and benefits of life as God has designed them to be enjoyed. So we best pay attention here.

Our text from Luke opens with Jesus teaching in one of the synagogues. We don't know exactly where but it's not important. It IS important and significant that Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath. He knows God's command to "remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy". Since the time of the exile when Temple worship was rendered impossible, faithful Jews gathered in the synagogue – a word which loosely means "to learn together" – and shared the reading of passages from the Torah, the first five books of our Old Testament, interpretations about those words (hear "sermon"), prayers, and the giving of alms: an approach not all too different from our worship experience today. What an adult

education class this would have been! Can you imagine sitting and hearing Jesus teach from the Scriptures? One day in the future we will experience the glory of that, but for now we just have to picture it in our minds. We don't know what the day's lesson was (maybe on observing the Sabbath?) but we know Jesus kept and honored the Sabbath as his Father desired on this day and most others as well according to the Gospel writers.

The next verse describes the arrival at the synagogue of a woman who had been crippled for 18 years – “She was bent over and quite unable to stand up straight” is Luke's vivid description of the scene. Now think about that a moment: here is a woman under tremendous affliction, and she shows up for church! Amazing! What an effort it must have taken. How tempting to take the easy way out, stay home, and not make the effort. Anyway, why worship when God has allowed such an affliction to remain for so long. We don't know the woman's thoughts, but how easy it would be to be bitter at God. How easy to remain home and not endure the stares and unspoken questions and criticisms of others looking at her, wondering why God has cursed her existence in this awful way. But there she is, observing God's command to “remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy” in the midst of life's struggles and challenges. What an example for others.

And others must have noticed her as Jesus did, according to Luke. What happens next is hard for us to grasp in terms of its radical nature. Remember, women and men didn't sit together in the synagogue – they were separated in distinct seating areas with a wooden screen or partition between them. In spite of this restriction, Luke tells us that Jesus sees her, demonstrating again his honoring and accepting of women exercised throughout his ministry. But not only does he see her, he calls her over – men almost never spoke to women in public in that culture, and certainly not in the synagogue! She might have done a double take – who me? I'm a woman and a cripple and you are talking to me in the synagogue? She swallows her pride and embarrassment and moves over to where Jesus

is, no doubt enduring the stares and murmuring disapproval of the men gathered before her. Then he spoke these amazing words: “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” Then Jesus touched her – another cultural taboo in Jesus’ day - and just like that, 18 years of crippled affliction come to an end right there in the midst of the men at the synagogue on the Sabbath day! No wonder she springs up straight uttering the praises of God – who wouldn’t? And who wouldn’t share her excitement and wonder and joy at this miraculous onset of freedom after long years of heartache and difficulty? There couldn’t be a better inducement to worship than seeing this woman experience release and relief from her affliction!

Well, unfortunately not everyone shared her joy. Seeing Jesus break the rules in several different dimensions is too much for the leader of the synagogue. You can almost imagine him saying “This wasn’t in the bulletin this morning!” Talking with a woman, inviting her into the men’s portion of the synagogue, even touching her was bad enough. But healing on the Sabbath was work, and work was strictly forbidden on the Sabbath. Only if the healing were a matter of life or death would the rabbis permit the healing to be done. But this woman had lived with her affliction for 18 years – she could come back tomorrow or the next day and be healed then, when it was legal. How could this teacher of the law make such an egregious error against the law right in front of everyone?

Jesus then drives home his lesson about the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath, the day God created so his children and creation could be set free and refreshed! He affirms the reality that everyone gathered in the synagogue that morning would care for and refresh and set free their animals to drink the water which they needed to live on the Sabbath without even giving it a thought. Of course you care for and provide for their needs. How much more, he chastises them – in reality chastising the burdens and restrictions of Sabbath laws afflicting the children of Israel and bending them over in the same way this

woman was bent over by her physical affliction – how much more appropriate and necessary is it to set free this woman – this daughter of Abraham - from her physical and spiritual bondage? We can hear and sense the emotion in Jesus’ words, the passion to redeem not only a woman from physical affliction, but to redeem a nation from the affliction of twisting the Sabbath into something it was never meant to be. People were no longer refreshed on the Sabbath, they were crushed under the burden of making sure they didn’t do anything wrong. Jesus wants them to be set free to participate in the joyous work of proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and all of the other signs of God’s continuing work of recreation and healing for his broken world.

Abraham Joshua Heschel called the Sabbath “a sanctuary in time” set apart as holy at the creation. God called all created things good but saved the designation of holy for a space in time meant to be shared and experienced through the ages. A sanctuary in time where Creator and created encounter one another freely and joyously. As Karl Barth points out, the Sabbath was the end of God’s week of creation work but the first day of human existence. God’s design for the first day of human experience was a day of refreshment in the presence of the Creator who had just breathed the breathe of life into their lungs. No work, no plans, no to-do lists, just basking in the goodness of God. As Barth said of the Sabbath, “it points away from everything that man himself can will and achieve and back to what God is for him and will do for him.”² Barth goes on to describe the characteristics of the Sabbath as *Freedom* – the freedom for a day to allow things to take their course, to not be run or driven by a program or agenda, in the image of today to have a “Blackberry-free” time of living; as *Festival* – a day of rejoicing in the Gospel of God’s activity: the completion of creation, celebrating Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, anticipating and expecting the future rule and reign of God’s kingdom in our lives and world; and as *Fellowship* – the assembling of the community around the words of the

² Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics.

Gospel in fellowship with other believers. These are the motions and movements so often lost in the hustle and bustle of our days just as they were lost in the crushing burden of laws and legalism in Jesus' day. Sabbath freedom is the creation gift of the One who made us and designed us to live in a certain way. As Barth said, "the grudging of the Sabbath day as a day of rest to oneself or others quickly avenges itself, and its observance brings its own reward."³ It's our decision – revenge or reward! God made it to work that way and we freely choose to live into one reality or the other.

How does our Sabbath practice measure up to Jesus' actions in that synagogue long ago? Would we be murmuring disapproval with the synagogue leader or dancing in praise beside a woman set free and refreshed? Jesus wants to set us free to live refreshed lives in the presence of the One who is Lord and Master of all. He's calling to you and me today to come to him and be set free to live in newness of life! Amen.

³ Ibid.