

Keeping the Sabbath

Luke 13:10-17

I've mentioned in the past that some of the stories in scripture really need to be seen visually, not just told, at least not told as succinctly as Luke tells this one. I think that's one of the reasons that drama has become such a part of worship in recent years – you need to see the story played out in order to really get the point. This is one of them.

So I'm going to ask you to imagine in your mind's eye the scene that just unfolded in the gospel reading. The disciples probably don't know it, but this will be Jesus' last appearance in the synagogue in Luke. He and his disciples are headed to Jerusalem where Jesus will be betrayed and crucified. Everything that happens in the second half of Luke has to be understood in that context. Jesus is on a mission. There is an intensity about everything that he does from now on. Everything is deliberate. Almost everything is provocative.

So, back to that picture in your mind's eye. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, and just like the children do here for the children's sermon, his disciples and the crowds are sitting at his feet, hearing the Word explained to them in more vivid and stirring ways than they have ever heard it before. For many of them that was the first time that religion had ever sounded relevant or exciting.

And as Jesus is teaching he's looking around, making eye contact with the worshippers, and he can't help but notice a late-comer, a woman. Now, most of the time those of us who regularly preach and teach really don't notice when people get up and leave for a few moments, or sneak in a few minutes late. It really isn't a distraction to us. A little noise, a little movement isn't a problem. But there was no escaping notice for this woman. Wherever she went, whether she was sneaking into church a little late or going to the market to do her shopping, everyone noticed her. In fact, everyone stared at her, just for a long, hard moment, and then they looked away. I saw a woman like this recently when I went to visit my father. Her spine was so curved that her head was nearly at the same level as her waist. All she could see was the ground. She couldn't see the sky, the horizon, across the room. She couldn't see the faces of her friends and neighbors, only their feet.

So think about what that must have looked like, Jesus healing her. Can you imagine him standing next to her, over her, and commanding her to be healed? Or making her twist sideways so she could look up at him out of the corner of her eye? I can't. That just wasn't Jesus' way. But in order to look her in the eye and speak directly to her, he would have had to get on the ground, maybe on his knees, and look up into her face. And when he placed his hands on her to heal her, where would he have put them? He must have put them on the one thing she had a constant view of: her feet. Her dirty, worn, callused feet. Maybe the moment of her healing is the picture of Jesus we should have painted and hung on the walls of our churches; Jesus at his most powerful, and at his most vulnerable and tender.

Do you remember what I said earlier, about Jesus being on the way to Jerusalem, about the intensity of his ministry, about everything he did being provocative from now on? If this story had taken place on a Tuesday Luke would have put it in the first half of the gospel. But it doesn't. It takes place on Saturday, on the Sabbath, and it takes place right under the nose of a rabbi, the leader of the synagogue. And he can't turn a blind eye when Jesus has flagrantly violated the Law of Moses. He has done work. He has broken the Sabbath by healing this

woman. He could have made plans to see her the next morning, or even as soon as the sun went down that day and the Sabbath was over. But he didn't. He healed her right then and there.

But Jesus gives it right back to him, and his response could have been taken one of two ways. The first is that some rules are meant to be broken. Rules that require people to wear a shirt and shoes when they go into a restaurant are good rules. Very good rules. Laws that require inexperienced drivers to be home and off the streets at a certain hour of the night are probably good rules, but admittedly inconvenient at times. But some rules just need to be broken, like ones that required certain ethnic groups to sit in the back of the bus, and rules that get a kindergartner expelled from school for kissing the cheek of classmate. They serve no good purpose; some of them do more harm than good. They put profits over people, power over basic human rights and dignity and common sense. And if courageous people don't stand up and say, 'this isn't right, and I'm willing to take a risk to say so' then people will continue to walk all over each other in the quest for money and power and the perception of order.

But you could take Jesus' response another way, too, and that is that he really didn't break the Sabbath laws. Now, he's not debating his violation of the law as the rabbi understands it, mind you. The actual law about observing the Sabbath was fairly vague; all it said was don't work. The fleshed-out version of that law came out of the keen legal minds of the religious leaders – those are the ones that identify specific things that are prohibited, like carrying water and, presumably, healing people. And that's the one he's debating the merits of.

Remember that there were actually two versions of the Ten Commandments. In the Exodus version the command to rest on the Sabbath is rooted in God's rest on the seventh day of creation. There's a time for work, and a time to rest from working. If God can take a break, you can take a break. You shouldn't work, and you shouldn't make anyone do any work on your behalf – not your kids, not your domestic help, not your animals, not the immigrant workers in town; presumably even the cooks and wait staff at your local restaurant get the day off. Everyone needs a day off, everyone gets a day off.

But the version of the Ten Commandments that's found in the fifth chapter of Deuteronomy is a little bit different. In Deuteronomy, the basis for observing the Sabbath comes from the Exodus. Its focus isn't just rest, but liberation. The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt, forced into hard labor, but God staged a breakout and set them free. Does everyone need a break from work now and then, yes, but this law specifically reminds them that being a child of God, a child of Abraham, means being set free from any sort of chain that binds them, any sort of condition or circumstance that cripples them or beats them down. Rest doesn't just mean freedom from work; it also means freedom from oppression, freedom from persecution, freedom from enslaving, life-draining human misery.

Like spending 18 years of your life so bent over that you can't see the sky, or another person's face, without twisting sideways and looking up.

If you look at it that way, Jesus wasn't breaking the Sabbath, he was keeping the Sabbath. Healing someone of their pain and misery was exactly the sort of thing the Sabbath was for.

In academic circles we would call this point in a sermon the hermeneutical leap, the jump from looking at the scripture itself to understanding why it is relevant to our lives. The problem is that over the years I have found that most people don't find sermons about the Sabbath to be very

relevant, not like ones dealing with anger, or money or helping your neighbor. Keeping the Sabbath just seems kind of old fashioned to us.

Now, I have to admit that I was pretty young when the Blue Laws were repealed and I never really lived in a time or a place where Sunday activities were restricted, but what I do remember is the first time I wore pants to school. Girls didn't wear pants to school for my first four years of elementary school, and I remember the liberation I felt, not being so limited in what I could do. I could hang upside down from the monkey bars and sit cross-legged and do anything I wanted. I was free. I imagine that that was what it was like when the Blue Laws were repealed. You were free. For the first time ever you could do your grocery shopping or go to movies, or just browse for fun. A whole extra day had been handed to you.

But the other thing that happened is that we got Blue Laws confused with Sabbath laws. The laws were repealed and we became like kids in a candy store. Sunday wasn't the Sabbath anymore; it was a day for us, a day we could do anything we wanted. Sleep in, watch the game, go hiking, boating, wash the cars, clean the house and get ready for the week ahead. It was like we made up a brand new Sabbath law: Sunday is a day to do whatever we want to do or need to do; a discretionary day. We decide what shape the day takes to meet our needs.

And I wonder if we maybe we don't pack up that same way of thinking and bring it to church with us Sunday morning. It's about me. I come to church to get what I want, what I need. It's a day and a place and a service just for me. Getting my battery charged, singing the hymns I like, being in an engaging and challenging Sunday School class, hearing a good sermon and having the chance to catch up with friends afterwards. All important and worthy, mind you, but all pretty inwardly focused, too. I go to church to get what I need, to get what I want.

How many of those 18 years do you suppose that woman had been going to the synagogue week after week, Sabbath after Sabbath? Did anyone ever take notice of her before that Saturday that Jesus did? Had anyone seen the pain that she was in before? Did the other people regularly take the time to spend a few minutes and get down on their knees to look up into her face and see the pain and loneliness and frustration there? Or did her silence, and the fact that it was impossible for her to make eye contact, allow her to be invisible to them?

Whichever way you choose to interpret Jesus' answer to the leaders of the synagogue, there is nothing self-centered or hedonistic about keeping the Sabbath. It isn't just for me; it's a day for us. It is a day for the community to rest and be restored, and that means that I cannot rest and gratify my own needs and desires as long as there is someone among us who is in pain.

Not everyone's burdens and pains are as obvious as the bent-over woman. But they are here, worshipping with us week after week, year after year, maybe fairly invisible to us because they come and go quietly and don't raise their eyes to meet ours. This is our Sabbath, but it's their Sabbath, too, and they come here week after week hoping for rest and liberation, for someone to look them in the eye and touch them and set them free.