

Jer. 1:4-10; Heb. 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17
Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Sabbath Freedom^{*}

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Emmanuel Church in the City of Boston
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Recently I went on a week-long retreat in upstate New York. It was called Gay Spirit Camp, and it was basically an interfaith summer camp for gay men of all spiritual backgrounds. Believe it or not, such a thing actually exists in the world!

I loved summer camp growing up, and I even served as a camp counselor with the Boy Scouts for a number of years. So Gay Spirit Camp was a wonderful experience for me.

There were many blessings from the week, but one of the greatest blessings was meeting my roommate, Lewis, who was a rabbi from the Conservative movement of Judaism.

The Conservative movement, for those of you who are not familiar with it, is much like the Episcopal Church. It stands midway between Reform and Orthodox Judaism, just as Anglicanism stands midway between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

Anyway, Lewis and I got along great. He was a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. I was a graduate of Union Theological Seminary, which was right across the street.

Each day, I watched as Lewis put on his *tallit*, or prayer shawl, and say his morning prayers. And on Thursday Lewis went with me to an Old Catholic Eucharist for the Feast of the Assumption.

When Friday sunset came around, Lewis mentioned to me that it was the Sabbath, or Shabbat, and that he would no longer be turning on the lights or doing other forms of work for the next twenty-four hours.

Since I knew that I would be preaching about the Sabbath in a week, I asked him what the Sabbath meant to him.

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Lewis said that most people knew about the connection between the Sabbath and rest. In the book of Genesis, God created the universe in six days and rested on the seventh. And so we – who are made in the image and likeness of God – are also called to rest on the seventh day.

But what is less well known is the connection between the Sabbath and freedom. In chapter 5 of the book of Deuteronomy, another justification is given for the Fourth Commandment of “You shall keep holy the Sabbath day.”

That justification is freedom, or the fact that God had brought the Israelites out of slavery from Egypt. You know, Charleton Heston as Moses, the *Ten Commandments*, the parting of the Red Sea, and all that.

“It makes a lot of sense that the Sabbath should be connected with the Exodus and freedom,” Lewis said. “Why is that?” I asked. “Because,” Lewis said, “slaves never had a day off.”

Today’s gospel reading is about these two competing visions of the Sabbath: rest and freedom. Jesus goes into the synagogue on the Sabbath and cures a woman who was unable to stand up straight for eighteen years.

The leader of the synagogue is shocked by this apparent violation of the commandment to keep holy the Sabbath day by resting. The woman had been bent over for eighteen years; what would be the harm of waiting another day?

Jesus responded that it was permissible to untie oxen or donkeys on the Sabbath so that they can be freed to drink water. So why could he not free this woman from her long-term ailment on the Sabbath as well?

I think it’s important not to reduce this gospel passage to a simple binary of the “legalistic Jews” on the one hand and the “flexible Christians” on the other. All too often, supercessionist Christian texts – like today’s reading from the Letter to the Hebrews – refer to a “new covenant” that obscures the common roots of Judaism and Christianity.

In fact, both the leader of the synagogue and Jesus are fundamentally in agreement on the commandment to keep holy the Sabbath day.

What they were debating – and that is precisely what people did in the synagogue in Jesus’ time – was how to live out this commandment.

My friend Lewis mentioned to me that the Israelite prohibition on curing on the Sabbath stemmed from the fact that people in ancient times had to grind their medicines, and that grinding was one of the thirty-nine forms of prohibited work on the Sabbath.

Even today, someone in the Conservative movement might not take aspirin on the Sabbath for a minor headache. But taking blood pressure medication would be permitted, since that person's life would otherwise be in danger.

Now as someone who spent over fifteen years practicing tax law, I love this kind of argumentation and could literally spend days debating whether Jesus' cure of the woman who was bent over is more akin to aspirin or blood pressure medication. Lucky for you, I won't.

But I'll admit that it's easy to lose sight of the forest from the trees. The real issue to keep in mind, I believe, are the values of rest and freedom that underlie today's Gospel reading.

You know, it makes a lot of sense for those of us who walk the Christian path to honor the value of freedom on our Sabbath. After all, the ancient church moved our Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday in order to honor Easter and the Resurrection, which was the ultimate freedom in terms of releasing us from the bondage of death.

So how do you honor freedom on the Sabbath? Do you attend church each week out of a childhood sense of guilt or obligation, or does coming to church on Sundays truly set your soul free? Do your ministries at Emmanuel come from a place of routine or habit, or do they free you to do what you deeply love and desire?

And when you leave this place each Sunday morning and walk into the world, have you been energized to preach – and live – a gospel of freedom with respect to everyone you meet during the week?

As someone who grew up as a frightened, closeted young man in the Roman Catholic church, I have deeply appreciated the freedom of the Episcopal Church and communities of faith like Emmanuel.

And I have learned a lot from feminist theologians who have taught me that sin is not only pride – that is, standing up too high – but it is also shame and self-criticism – that is, not standing up high enough.

Like Jeremiah in today's reading from the Hebrew Bible, I can remember saying to myself: "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." I can't be a theologian because I'm gay. I can't serve the church because I'm not good enough, moral enough, worthy enough, holy enough. The list goes on and on.

All too often, institutions like churches can be well meaning in terms of wanting people to follow the rules. They are, after all, institutions. But these rules may inadvertently keep us down – or metaphorically bent over – for eighteen years, or perhaps for an entire lifetime.

But as God tells us in today's Hebrew Bible reading: "Do not say, 'I am only a boy.'" God gives us courage to stand up straight, because God is with us and has consecrated us as prophets before we were even born.

This coming Wednesday, August 28th, is the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech. King prophetically began his speech by calling the march "the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation."

Many of my friends are in Washington, D.C. this weekend honoring this occasion and giving thanks for the ways in which our civil rights mothers, fathers, and parents have sacrificed their lives for our freedoms. (If you have not seen the movie *The Butler*, by the way, I highly commend it to you.)

One of the unsung heroes of the March was Bayard Rustin. Rustin was the key organizer of the March and one of King's right hand persons. But he was kept in the shadows because he was a gay Black man who had been arrested for having sex in the back of a car, and King's advisers didn't want his presence to taint the movement. Even well-meaning institutions – and Christians – can keep people down.

Earlier this month it was announced that Rustin would be awarded posthumously the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award in the United States. Although it took half a century for his work on the March to be recognized, I am glad that Rustin has been freed at last from the shadows of homophobia, and will be honored for his enormous contributions to the Civil Rights Movement.

I thought it would be appropriate to close my sermon with the concluding paragraph from King's "I Have a Dream" speech. It seems particularly appropriate in light of today's gospel about freedom and the Sabbath.

As an aside, I want to name and honor those who are not mentioned in King's speech, including women, Latinos and Latinas, Asian Americans, Native Americans, LGBTIQ people, Muslims, people of non-Abrahamic faiths or of no faith, undocumented immigrants, and people with disabilities.

But what really strikes me is how relevant King's speech remains today, nearly half a century after it was first delivered. King says:

"When we allow freedom to ring – when we let it ring from every city and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last, Free at last, Great God almighty, We are free at last.'"

How will *you* honor freedom on this Sabbath day?

+Amen.