

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost
Luke 13:10-17

Rest and Liberation*

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Church of the Transfiguration
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One of the most meaningful experiences that I had in seminary was taking a course on Jewish-Christian dialogue. Half of the class consisted of us seminarians from Union Theological Seminary. The other half consisted of our neighbors from across the street at Jewish Theological Seminary, or JTS.

It was during this class that I met my friend Faith, who was a rabbinical student at JTS. We really hit it off, and we ended up spending hours outside of class talking about our respective traditions, attending each other's worship services, and debating the finer points of theology with each other. We even saw Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" together, which was quite a testament to our friendship!

During this time, I attended the first of many Friday night Shabbat dinners at Faith's apartment. It was a wonderful way to welcome in the Sabbath: a time to focus on God, family, and friends, along with delicious food and heartfelt prayers. Most of all, it was a gift to take an intentional break from the nonstop demands of the work week – email, phone calls, and the like – especially in the city that never sleeps.

Today's gospel passage from Luke involves a heated debate between Jesus and a leader of a synagogue over what it means to remember the Sabbath day and to keep it holy. Jesus is teaching in the synagogue when he sees a woman who had been bent over for 18 years. He calls her over. Before she even has a chance to say anything, he lays his hands on her, and sets her free from her ailment.

The leader of the synagogue is deeply upset because Jesus has healed someone on the Sabbath, which is a prohibited category of work according to Jewish teaching. But Jesus rebuts this view by giving the example of untying an animal in order to lead it to water. If it's permissible to untie an animal on the Sabbath, why isn't it permissible to set this woman free from her ailment?

Often times today's gospel is reduced to a story about the compassionate Christian on the one hand (as represented by Jesus) as opposed to the legalistic Jew on the other (as represented by the synagogue leader). That is far too simplistic of a reading. What's really going on is a debate about the purposes behind the Sabbath, and what those implications are for us as people of faith.

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So what's happening in this passage? As some of you may know, my own professional background is that of a tax lawyer. And so I love wrestling with codes, rules, and the interpretation of ambiguous provisions. Under the Jewish oral law, ultimately codified in Tractate Shabbat in the Talmud, there are 39 categories of prohibited work on the Sabbath. For example, one of these prohibitions is burning, or the making of a fire. So not only is lighting a candle during Shabbat prohibited, but so is smoking, turning on a light switch, or even starting an engine.

The debate over healing on the Sabbath relates to the prohibition on grinding. Now what does grinding have to do with healing, you might ask? Well, before we had Rite Aids and Duane Reades on every corner, people had to make their own medicines by grinding herbs with a mortar and pestle. However, the prohibition on Sabbath grinding and healing was never absolute. Healing was always permitted in the case of a life-threatening illness, or *pikuach nefesh*.

So the real dispute in our gospel passage wasn't about whether Jesus could heal on the Sabbath. It was about whether the woman's ailment was sufficiently life threatening to permit this otherwise forbidden act. From the perspective of the synagogue leader, the woman already had her affliction for 18 years. So why not wait for a few more hours until sunset in order to comply with the rules? By contrast, Jesus pointed out that if an animal's thirst is sufficiently life threatening to permit work, why wouldn't the long-term suffering of this woman also justify immediate action?

What's really going on here is a debate between two rabbis over the purpose of the Sabbath. According to the leader of the synagogue, the primary purpose of the Sabbath is rest. God rested after the six days of creation, and so should we. The Day of Rest requires us to give thanks for creation and to acknowledge the fact that God's care for the world will continue even if we stop working.

But there is another lesser-known reason for the Sabbath: liberation. The Sabbath also commemorates God's deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt and freeing them from slavery. If you think about it, the key difference between slaves and free people is that slaves are never allowed to stop working. Only people who are truly free are able to keep the Sabbath.

This liberative strand of the Sabbath is highlighted in the Book of Deuteronomy, and it also appears in the liturgy of the Friday evening kiddush, or the blessing over the wine. The kiddush prayer mentions that the Sabbath is a "memorial of the Exodus from Egypt," or *zekher liytsiat mitsraiym*.

For those of us who live in the hustle-bustle of the metropolitan New York City area, there is another powerful connection between the Sabbath and liberation. The biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann has described the Sabbath in existential terms as freedom from the "rat race of anxiety" and freedom from the slavery of the never-ending "production and consumption of commodity goods."

So today's gospel passage can be understood as Jesus saying "Don't forget about liberation" on the Sabbath. That is, the Sabbath is not just about rest. It is also about freedom. And so the principle of freedom tips the scale in favor of healing the woman who is bent over – right here and right now. Eighteen years is long enough; let us not wait until sunset. Freedom delayed is freedom denied.

The beauty of the Anglo-Catholic tradition is that it has always taken liberation seriously. It has never just been about smells and bells. Our predecessors in the 19th century Oxford Movement ministered to the inner cities and slums. As one priest has described it, Anglo-Catholicism is about "revolutionary beauty." It is a "sacramental challenge to the ugliest expressions of industrialization and capitalism." By taking the incarnation seriously, Anglo-Catholicism is a condemnation of the "social sin of an acquisitive and complacent ruling class."

So what are the implications of this passage for us on this Sunday, the Christian Sabbath? What do Sundays mean to you? The fact that you are here at mass – and not at work – means that you are taking the principle of rest seriously. But what about the liberative strand of the Sabbath? After all, Sundays are set aside in order to commemorate the ultimate liberation: freedom from death through the resurrection.

How might the Little Church help us to free others from their burdens, just as we have been freed from our sins by Christ Jesus? As you look around, can you see the burdens of our fellow parishioners, whether visible or invisible? How might we connect what we do each week in this holy space with the painful suffering of the outside world?

Sometimes religious institutions – by their very nature – keep us down by their rules. Like the woman who was bent over for eighteen years, we are prevented from standing up and taking our rightful place at the table. We see this in the history of how people of color, women, LGBT people, and people with disabilities have been excluded from full participation in the church.

But sometimes our institutions are catalysts for liberation. And when that happens, we give thanks. To quote the closing words of today's gospel passage, we rejoice at all the wonderful things that Christ Jesus has done for us.

Faith and I remain friends to this day, albeit mostly through Facebook. She is now the rabbi educator at a large synagogue in Baltimore. She is also the mother of five beautiful children. And I am now, of course, an Episcopal priest here in New York City. I am grateful for our many years of friendship. And I still rejoice at that seminary class from a dozen years ago that introduced me to the beauty of the Sabbath, and its dual purposes of rest and liberation.