

“God Does the Sabbath to You”  
A Sermon on Luke 13:10-17  
Pentecost 13 C  
August 22, 2010

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What comes to mind when you hear the word “Sabbath?” Do you think of the so-called blue laws that used to keep certain retail stores closed on Sundays? Do you think of seeing your Jewish neighbors walking by your house on Saturdays? Do you imagine that keeping the Sabbath holy is supposed to keep you out of the office on Sundays? Or does the Sabbath mean simply the common sense that rest is good nestled within the rhythms of busy, active lives?

The Sabbath usually means for us the cessation of normal activity, That’s what got Jesus into trouble in this story from Luke. He’s just not supposed to do healing on the day when you’re not supposed to do much of anything. It’s a reasonably straightforward protest. Jesus shall graciously demonstrate that Sabbath is indeed the cessation of normal activity, but to then end that God can get room in our lives to do God’s activity. Sabbath makes room for freedom.

I don’t think we’ll make much headway on understanding this gospel by the compassionate interpretation. The compassionate argument would advise that feeling compassionate about anyone’s suffering and then doing something about it knows no season or prohibition. So then, the underlying interpretation is to do good for your neighbor no matter what day it happens to be. That is the argument in Jesus reply to the leaders of the synagogue. While it is important to note in the text, I don’t think that common sense argument is the good news for us this morning.

Nor do I think we’ll get somewhere by the faith demonstration line of interpretation. That interpretation would praise the bent over woman for her presentation of faith to Jesus as a work rewarded by healing, albeit an unasked for healing. There is no mention in this particular text of the woman’s disposition at all. She is not commended for her faith, her sense of urgency in Jesus’ presence, or her persistence in plea. Other healings do mention these things, but this one does not. This one is all Jesus’ initiative.

Here is what the text says: Jesus is doing the Sabbath thing, teaching in the synagogue. There appeared a woman bent over, crippled. Luke underlines her condition by alluding to it three times. For eighteen years “she was quite unable to straighten up.” This was a chronic condition. Many of us know from our experiences with our own chronic, long-standing challenges that humans can make astonishing adjustments, accommodations to what ails them. Things that really cause you suffering years ago you somehow developed a creative work around for. You adapted to the most obvious troubles. Perhaps surprising even yourself, what once was suffering is now only annoying. Afflicted, you and I have

found ways “realize the possible” and to still “feel at home in the world.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, she had probably gotten used to it.

She was just the crippled woman. They had been seeing her that way for eighteen years. Everyone knew her that way. I like to imagine her as not so much stoic in her demeanor as realistic. Tribulation become habit. “Sea of trouble” adapted to, not “opposed.”

Jesus acts unilaterally. He calls her over and announces, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” And she stands straight for the first time in almost two decades. Precisely what she could not do, Jesus frees her to do. The Sabbath is for giving God room in lives for freedom.

But perhaps freedom as God’s action is *particularly* fitting for the Sabbath. This is freedom in exactly the place in this woman’s life where she was not free. Right there in the synagogue, Jesus, if you will, *does* the Sabbath to the woman.

The Sabbath is not just for stopping. It is for stopping all the buzzing activity, shutting up the endless voices of worry, planning, performing, getting just long enough so that God can actually get through to you and me. God, of course gets through to you in all that buzzing activity, but here, on the Sabbath, God has *promised* to show up here. The Sabbath -- or the Christian version of it, Sunday -- is for God taking you by the ears and finally getting his word and sacrament into your head, into your life. No matter how you and I may have gotten used to our bent over boundness, Sunday is for God’s gracious gift of freedom.

Luke is out to convince you and me that God’s kingdom is now breaking in on the world. Today he does so with a woman summoned by Jesus, unable to stand up straight. And standing up straight is how he left her.

God still does powerful things on the Sabbath. God can really *do* the Sabbath to you. Cease your buzzing activity, be still and know that God is here for you, receive what God has to say and do to you in the presence of these of these other bent over people who are quite unable to stand up straight.

There is not a lot of fireworks here. God does not shout his presence here, but God is here on our Christian version of the Sabbath. There are the songs we sing together. There is the word from scripture spoken by one needing grace just like you. There is the word spoken to you from this pulpit. There are prayers in which the whole world is prayed to God. There is the presence of all these others for you. There is here a little bread and a sip of wine.

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<sup>1</sup> No one writes better on this accommodation process than Oliver Sacks, *Awakenings* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1983), pp 233-42.

Freedom is really here for you. The very thing which you cannot do – that very thing – God gives you the freedom to do. The Sabbath is not just for stopping. It is also for receiving freedom.

Before I could not forgive, but now. . .  
Before, I would never have conceived of myself as a leader, now. . .  
Before, I was afraid, and now. . .  
Before, I avoided something, but now . . .  
Before, I would never have given such a gift, but now. . .  
Before, I could not trust God for my future, but now. . .<sup>2</sup>

It is odd, I suppose, that we depend on such simple things for our freedom: We share here not the elixir of the gods, or the abstract techniques of spirituality. It is not the superiority of our meditation here that finally reached up to God. Here God summons us to receive freedom in a word, a song, a splash of water, a sip of wine.

There is a story about a man who was told by his doctor that he must go on a diet of fruit or he would die. So he went to the grocer and asked, “Do you have any fruit?” The grocer said, “We have apples, oranges, peaches, plums, pears, melons, berries of all sorts. You name it, we got it.”

“Well no,” said the man, “I need fruit.” So off he went to the next grocer where, you can guess, The result was the same. And so he died.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus called the woman over, touched her, and the very thing she could never do, Jesus gave her the freedom to do it. For the first time in eighteen years she stood up straight. And the woman and the crowds began praising God at the wonderful things he was doing.

*On this, our version of the Sabbath, summon us to stop our busyness, summon us to you. Ignore our adaptations to being bound and bent over. Do the Sabbath to us. Give us freedom in that very thing which we cannot do. And let us be freed. And let us be freed. Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> This list inspired from Alyce Mackenzie, “Lectionary Reflections on Luke 13:10-17”, August 16, 2010, at [www.patheos.com](http://www.patheos.com).

<sup>3</sup> The last three paragraphs are from Gerhard Forde, “Abstractions Aside,” *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, ed. by Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 280-1. There is a wonderful literary version of this distracting obsession missing the real issue in Anton Chekhov, “The Death of a Clerk,” *Stories of Anton Chekhov*, trans. by Larissa Volokhonsky, and Richard Pevear (New York, Bantam Books, 2000) pp. 1-3.

