

Luke 13:10-17

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.

THE FOURTH COMMANDMENT

When I teach a class on the Christian faith, one of the basic things I teach is the Ten Commandments. And the fourth commandment is "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." (Exodus 20:8)

That sounds simple enough until you ask people what they think this means. They're not sure. How can we remember the Sabbath? How can we keep it holy?

Quite often with older folks this commandment triggers a discussion about how we used to have blue laws. For you youngsters out there, blue laws required businesses to close on Sunday.

There was no shopping at Target or eating at the Olive Garden in those days. Come to think of it there was no Target or Olive Garden in those days! And when you went to the grocery store the alcohol was not for sale.

I remember my grandfather telling me about Sundays on the farm in rural Virginia. Very early they would rise and do the necessary farm chores before they would go to church around eleven. (By the way, that's why the "sacred" hour for worship in the church is 11 AM. It gave the farmers time to milk the cows before coming to church.)

But, after the chores were done, Sunday was observed as a true Sabbath. No work was done and especially no play. They would read the Bible to the children ... in Old English of course. My grandfather said that these readings were so dull that one time his pious father fell asleep while reading.

The children were delighted and sneaked outside to play in their good clothes. Unfortunately my grandfather awoke and demonstrated another biblical principle. "Spare the rod and spoil the child." Those folks were serious about the "Sabbath."

SABBATH BREAKING

The same was true in Jesus' day. The gospels are filled with stories about Sabbath conflicts.

Absolutely no work was to be done on the Sabbath.

But, Jesus healed on the Sabbath repeatedly. And this breaking of the Sabbath brought a harsh reaction from the religious leaders.

In the minds of the religious leaders Jesus was not being respectful of God's law. The Sabbath was holy and that meant absolutely no work, including healing.

That's what they said. But, that wasn't what they did.

My grandfather milked the cows before he went to church, and the farmers in Jesus' day did the same sort of thing.

Jesus said, "What do you mean that you don't do any work on the Sabbath? Don't you untie your donkey and your ox from the manger and take them to get a drink of water?"

It's not in the Bible, but I can imagine the religious leaders saying something like,

"Well, Jesus that's different. I can't neglect my animals. They are an important investment."

And Jesus replied,

"If you care that much about your animals, don't you care about this woman who has suffered for 18 years?"

After all what is the point of the Sabbath if not to bring rest to a woman who has known no rest for so many years?"

The religious leaders were put to shame. Not only did they misinterpret God's law and God's will; they also rejected God's Son. How did they go so wrong?

A NEW SPIRIT

I think they were so busy keeping the letter of the law that they didn't keep the spirit of the law. Responding to a similar Sabbath controversy Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for men and women and not the other way around." (Mark 2:27)

In other words the Sabbath is not an obligation. The Sabbath is a gift, God's gift of rest and healing.

The appearance of the crippled woman was not a coincidence. It was divinely appointed. We could translate verse 11, "Behold there appeared a woman who had been crippled for 18 years." It's like when the angels appeared to the shepherds and said, "Behold I bring you good tidings."

This is Luke's way of telling us that God is breaking into the world in a new way. And what is this new way?

In Jesus God is bringing a word of healing to those who need it most.

The kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus is about straightening up those who are bent over. The kingdom of God as revealed in Jesus is about lifting up those who have been oppressed and downtrodden.

And it's happening here and now on the Lord's Day. Behold the woman who is broken down by life is lifted up. She is able to stand up straight for the first time in 18 years, and she is praising God.

Jesus teaches us that keeping the Sabbath is not so much about what we refrain from doing. Keeping the Sabbath is about recognizing what God is doing in our midst.

What better way to keep the Sabbath than to lift someone up?

What better way to keep the Sabbath than to praise God for God's salvation?

BLAMING THE VICTIM

But, the leader of the synagogue still didn't get it.

He kept saying over and over to anyone who would listen, "Why come for healing on the Sabbath? There are six other days of the week on which work can be done? Come on those days and be healed."

This religious leader is not only blaming Jesus for healing on the Sabbath; he's also blaming the victim.

We see the same sort of thing today.

Quite often the victim is victimized twice by a society that is prejudiced toward those who are in power.

And sadly this has also been true in the church.

Down through the ages some religious leaders have turned Jesus' word of grace and healing into a word of judgment and despair.

Instead of freeing people from bondage religious leaders have heaped heavier burdens upon people that are already sagging under a heavy load.

What does it really mean to remember the Sabbath? What does it mean to keep it holy?

It means finding a way to bring healing to the one who is broken.

It means helping someone stand up straight in a world that often wants to make us walk bent over.

CRIPPLED BY A SPIRIT

I wonder what life was like for that woman who spent 18 years bent over.

The Greek word suggests that her problem was severe. She was bent double. She spent her days looking at the ground.

More than that, the Scripture tells us that a "spirit" crippled this woman.

This suggests that at one time this woman could stand straight and tall. At one time she could look people in the eye.

And then something happened. Some spirit came into her life and everything changed.

We don't really know what happened. We don't know what this spirit was. The Bible doesn't say.

But, what we do know is that this spirit assumed power over her. This spirit took control of her life. This spirit had caused her to live her life in a crippled state.

And in this way the spirit limited her choices.

It dictated her actions. This spirit limited where she could go and what she could do.

I suspect that this spirit not only crippled the woman physically but also mentally and spiritually. It controlled what she thought of herself and others.

SPIRITS THAT CRIPPLE TODAY

We might not be bent over double. But, many of us know what it means to live with a spirit that limits our life. Many of us know what it means to be crippled by a spirit that threatens to take everything from us.

I don't know what gets into people but sometimes people do horrible things to each other. The weak and the vulnerable are abused. And the scars are so traumatic that we're unable to move on.

We get addicted to alcohol or drugs. We become accustomed to a way of living that takes everything from us, and yet we can't quit. Once we're under the power of that spirit, it overwhelms us.

And after struggling for so long we finally just give up. We let our disability define us.

I'm the alcoholic. I'm the fat person. I'm the cripple. I'm the one with a bad marriage. I'm self-centered jerk. And so forth.

Those labels stick to us. And we are ashamed.

We live in a society that believes everything can be worked out and figured out. But, it doesn't seem that way for some of us. We walk bent over because we can't look others in the eye. In fact we walk bent over because we don't want to look in the mirror either.

So we keep our head down.

That was how it was with the woman in our story for today. There was a reason that she came in late to synagogue that day. She didn't want to be noticed.

SIGNS OF THE KINGDOM

But, Jesus noticed. In fact Jesus called her over. We don't know her name. Luke doesn't mention her name. But, I bet Jesus knew her name. And I think he called her by name.

Her healing begins with the call of Jesus. Her healing begins with the ministry of one who refuses to let the spirit define her. She's more than just a person who is

bent over double. She's a part of the synagogue service. She's a daughter of Abraham. She's what Sabbath is all about.

She comes to Jesus. He touches her. She is healed. She stands up straight and praises God.

Oddly enough this miracle like many of the miracles of Jesus causes controversy. Why? It's because they are more than just miracles. They are signs.

The miracles are signs of God's kingdom. And God's kingdom doesn't fit in with the ways of the world.

That's why the synagogue leader fixates on the fact that Jesus' healing was illegal. He perseverates on the fact that this healing didn't need to occur on the Sabbath. He says it over and over again.

But, the real problem wasn't a technical breaking of the Sabbath. The real problem was the fact that the religious leader had a heart that was far from God.

When we use religious language and yet act in a way that is not compassionate we are hypocrites. And that's what Jesus called the religious leaders that day.

In a world where victims are blamed and the downtrodden are pushed even farther down, the miracle of Jesus calls us to reevaluate what it means to truly worship God.

I remember another miracle that the Bible talks about.

Jesus and his disciples were walking down the road and they ran into a man who had been blind from birth. The disciples assumed that either this man or his parents had sinned in some terrible way. Why else would this man be put in such a terrible situation?

And so they asked Jesus, "Who sinned, the man or his parents?" And Jesus said, "You've got it all wrong. It's not about casting blame. It's about lifting up those who are broken. It's about bringing healing so that God might be praised."

For the disciples the man born blind was a theological riddle. For Jesus the man born blind was an opportunity to demonstrate the grace of God. And that made all the difference.

IT'S ABOUT SOMEONE LIKE ME

I've had a hard time writing the sermon this week.

It's not because this passage is so difficult to preach. It's pretty straightforward.

I've had a hard time writing this sermon because in the middle of the week I had a strong coughing fit and in the process threw out my lower back. I didn't know that was possible! But, as time goes by I find many things are possible!

And so, after sitting in the chair at my desk for a while, I had a hard time straightening up! When you can't straighten up you look at life in a different way.

I used to make fun of those TV commercials for prescriptions.

But, this week I was beginning to wonder if Cymbalta might be right for me! Maybe I should ask my doctor.

And I began to look at this passage a bit differently as well. Maybe we can only understand the grace of God as revealed in Jesus we recognize our need for that grace.

I was literally bent over this week. I literally had a hard time getting out of bed.

And that colored the way I looked at everything. I too praised God when I was able to stand up straight again! This passage was not a theoretical discussion about the Sabbath. This passage meant something to me personally.

When I did the Bible study on this passage at Good Samaritan Village this week I began by saying that the story this week was about Jesus healing a woman who was bent over and couldn't straighten up.

And it just so happened that there is a woman in our study who fits that description. She smiled softly and said, "You mean a woman like me?"

Yes, it was a story about a woman like her. And it's also a story about you and me too.

You see we're all bent over in some way. I may not know your particular struggle. But, Jesus knows. And Jesus cares. And Jesus is stronger than your struggle or the labels you bear.

And Jesus is calling you. "Hey you with the walker in the back. Come forward and be healed."

GOD'S CHILDREN

How does Jesus heal? He heals us by calling us by our true name.

The world names us by our disability or our failures or our sins. Jesus names us according to who we are in God's eyes. Long ago he saw not a cripple, but a daughter of Abraham who needed to be saved.

And when Jesus sees us he sees that we are God's children. We are God's sons and daughters. We are chosen by the grace of God. And it is this that heals us. It is this that keeps the unclean spirits of the world from naming us.

Sometimes we have a hard time believing that. Sometimes there's a little voice inside us who says, "That's just too good to be true."

SATAN

But, I want you to note one other detail in our lesson for today. In verse 16 Jesus says that for 18 years this woman was bound by Satan.

Wow. This woman had bigger problems than just a bad back.

What did Jesus mean by that? How was Satan involved in her 18 year ordeal?

In the Bible Satan is not the guy in the red suit with horns on his head.

Satan is the accuser. Satan is the father of all lies. Satan is the one who tells you that your disabilities, your weaknesses, your sins and your failures define you.

I'm not sure who's playing the role of Satan in your life. I'm not sure who is telling you that the Sabbath is not a day to be healed but a day to sit down and shut up.

But, Jesus has a different message for you today. Jesus tells you to stand up straight because God is not in the business of condemning.

God is in the business of saving. God is in the business of setting right what is wrong.

And God is beginning this new creation with you.

For many people the day of worship (for us Sunday) is a day of obligation. It's about what we can do for God. We owe this to God.

But, today Jesus tells us that the day of worship, our Sabbath day is not about what we can do for God.

The Sabbath day is about what God has chosen to do for us. The day of worship is about remembering how God has freed us so that we can free others.

Today is not the Sabbath that the Jews celebrated. Our day of worship is the first day of the week. There's a reason for that. This is the day that Jesus was raised from the dead. This is the day that changed everything forever.

This is the day when we remember that God not only lifts us up in life; God also lifts us up in death as well.

Even in the face of death we will not be afraid because Jesus calls our name. That's what it means to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. That's the Spirit of the law.

And that Spirit gives us hope not only for this life but also for the life to come.

Don't believe anyone who tells you differently.

Amen.