

Sabbath

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Luke 13:10-17: Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. 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. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

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."

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? 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?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

INTRODUCTION

If you follow national news, you are probably aware that for many years there have been political efforts to post the Ten Commandments in public buildings, especially schools and courthouses. Aside from the legal questions of separation of church and state, there is a more fundamental problem. There are different versions of the Ten Commandments. Everyone agrees that there are ten, but there is no agreement on what they are. For Lutherans and Catholics, for example, the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy is the 3rd commandment, but for Jews, Moravians, most Protestants, it is the 4th commandment.

If you look at page 32 in your book of worship, you'll see a list of the Ten Commandments in our Liturgy for Grace. That short list is probably close to what you may have memorized in confirmation or Sunday School. This is a bulletin-point version of the Ten Commandments. The fourth line simply says:

“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.” But in the Bible this commandment is four verses long. I’ll read what it says in Deuteronomy 5:12-15:

DEUTERONOMY

¹² “Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. ¹³ Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. ¹⁵ Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.”

SABBATH=REST

Unlike the list of Ten Commandments that we usually see, this passage explains in detail how to make the seventh day a holy day. It is holy because you rest. The Hebrew word Sabbath literally means to rest or cease from doing something. I remember when one of our daughters was at that age when she was always talking in the car. Occasionally we’d pull in a drive-thru and buy her a milkshake to give her mouth something else to do. We were, in effect, having a Sabbath from the chatter.

As far as historians can determine, the Israelites were the only people in the ancient world to have a day of rest every week. The Babylonians invented the seven-day week, but it was the Israelites who declared that there are six days for work and one for rest. For 24 hours each week, the Israelites were required to rest and do no work of any kind. Believe it or not, it appears that the Moravians in Pennsylvania were the first people in America to observe a 2-day weekend. They took Saturday as a Sabbath and Sunday as a day for worship. They understood that Sunday worship is not restful, unless you nap during sermons, of course.

WHAT IS THE SABBATH?

When I was teaching Western religions at Salem College many years ago, few of my Christian students could tell me what the Sabbath is. Most of them assumed

that the Sabbath is Sunday and that the meaning of Sabbath is a day to worship God. Most of my students were surprised to learn that the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy was not talking about going to church on Sunday. Jewish timekeeping, the Sabbath is the last day of the week. It starts on sundown Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday.

I hear people say that we should make the Ten Commandments part of national law, but could you imagine what would happen in modern America if no one could work from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown. No stores or restaurants could be open. No movie theaters. There would be no sports on Friday night or all day Saturday. No kids' soccer. No golf, no cookouts, no buying or selling. No traveling by plane, train, or automobile. That's the way it is in observant Jewish communities. When our daughter Sarah was living in Brooklyn, we sometimes visited her on Saturday. We knew when we got to the Jewish neighborhood of Crown Heights because the stores and restaurants were all closed.

SABBATH AND LIBERATION

Rather than discussing what should and shouldn't be allowed on the Sabbath, I think it is important to look at the purpose of the Sabbath day in the Bible. According to Deuteronomy, the reason the Israelites had a weekly day of rest was to remind them that their ancestors had been enslaved in Egypt and were not allowed to rest. Their ancestors had been forced to toil in the equatorial sun all day, every day, with just enough food and water to keep them alive and able to work. They did not have the luxury of rest, reflection, relaxation and recreation. Their life was nothing but toil.

The sabbath was a reminder that God had rescued their ancestors from slavery. It was like a weekly Juneteenth, but it wasn't just about celebration and gratitude for freedom. God instructed the Israelites to remain their ancestors' suffering, and so treat their own workers, servants, and even their animals with more compassion than they had experienced in Egypt. God did not free the children of Israel from bondage so that they could abuse others. Resting on the seventh day was a weekly reminder of the need to worship God by showing compassion to others.

ISAIAH

Our Old Testament lesson for today reiterates this point. The prophet Isaiah reminded the Jews who were returning to their promised land of Israel to keep the Sabbath holy. They must not trample the Sabbath by using that as a day to pursue their own pleasure or profit. The Sabbath is a day of rest from greed and competition and exploitation of people and animals. The prophet told the Jews that if they refrain from abusing others, at least one day a week, they will be blessed.

BENT WOMAN

With that background in mind, let's look at our gospel lesson. Jesus was teaching in the synagogue when he saw a crippled woman walking into the synagogue. She would have been walking in the segregated section for women. She may have been begging for alms, or she may have simply come to prayer. The men listening to Jesus probably did not even notice the women. She was just an old woman bent double by disease. She was not worth their time and attention.

We are told that she had been bent for eighteen years, and, as you may know, we're more sympathetic when people are first injured or get sick. If they stay sick or impaired, we tend to get bored and look away. We get tired of their chronic condition and thoughtlessly exclude them instead of inviting them be part of our community. I'm sure no one in the synagogue that day really looked at the old bent woman.

No one noticed her – except the teacher. Jesus called out to her. I'm sure the crippled woman was shocked when Jesus spoke to her. Shocked that Jesus didn't avert his eyes from her. Shocked that a man, a rabbi no less, spoke to a woman in the synagogue. I imagine she was at first afraid that the rabbi was going to use her to prove a point about how people suffer for their sins as so many others had done before.

Instead, Jesus told her that she was free from her affliction. Jesus got up from the seat where he was teaching and walked over to the women's area of the synagogue as people looked on in surprise. Jesus then laid his hands on this poor woman whom most people treated as untouchable. Luke tells us that the unnamed woman *immediately* stood up straight and praised God for her healing. For the first in eighteen years she could look to the heavens in gratitude and look her neighbors in the eye.

Just imagine the scene that Jesus made when he broke the rules and traditions that segregated and diminished women; that separated the healthy and the infirm; that separated rabbis from the people; that made the sabbath restrictive instead of liberating.

RESPONSE

Up to this point, this sounds like a typical healing story in the gospel. All the elements are there: the crowd, the crippled woman, Jesus telling her she is well, Jesus touching her, and her praising God. It's a beautiful story. And we could end right there.

But like the old Twilight Zone, there is a twist at the end that makes this story profound. The leader of the synagogue could not contain himself. Now, the leader of a synagogue was usually a wealthy man who kept the synagogue in good repair and organized everything. He was kind of like president of the board of trustees of a college. This man probably had slaves to care for him, and he was used to everyone listening to him when he spoke. He was probably a good, pious man; a benefactor. He may have given alms to this woman week after week, or ordered his servants to bring her food.

Had Jesus simply pointed to the woman and urged the audience to show compassion to the afflicted and homeless, the leader of the synagogue would have probably nodded in agreement. But when Jesus healed her on the *sabbath*, he was indignant. He felt the need to mansplain to Jesus about Jewish laws and traditions. He openly criticize Jesus for what he done and pointed out that he could have waited until Sunday to cure her. It's been 18 years, what was one more day?.

SABBATH IS FOR HEALING

I think we can call Jesus' action provocative compassion. Yes, he could have waited and avoided making a scene, but he intentionally and publicly reached out in compassion. He seized an opportunity to illustrate his view of the Sabbath. Jesus intentionally violated the sanctity of the Sabbath by healing someone, and he did it in the synagogue no less. Jesus dared to touch this afflicted woman in front of everyone and set her free from the illness that enslaved her. Jesus gave her dignity and hope, and he taught us that the Sabbath was not intended to place burdens on people or to add to their sufferings.

CONCLUSION

We do not keep the Sabbath holy by showing everyone how righteous and holy and special we are. The true Sabbath is not just a day without work; it is about reaching out in love to care for people. When we feed the hungry, heal the broken, give hope to the despondent, and liberate the oppressed, we observe the Sabbath. Any day and every day can be a sabbath day. As the prophet Isaiah to the Jews long ago: “If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil; if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.”