

Sermon, Pentecost 14C  
Luke 13: 10-17  
August 25, 2019

***Sabbath... Now!***

When you consider the world today, what is it you think needs to be changed *right now*, in order for life to be better for all of us?

My friend Lisa thinks there needs to be more laughter. I've always envied her quick wit, her light touch that lifts the spirits of those around her... My cousin Ellen thinks everyone should have a place to call home. So, she and her husband Steve adopted four children of varying ethnicities. And once they were launched, Ellen picked up a hammer and some construction skills, volunteering at several of Columbus' Habitat for Humanity work sites... A friend of my father's, both mechanical engineers, is named Harry Anderson. Harry thinks those who work in his manufacturing company should share the profits. When we toured his company we could see how hard his assembly line employees worked together, how creatively they solved problems, and how much they enjoyed their relationship with Harry as the business owner. And they told us what fun they had celebrating at the end of each year when bonus checks were opened!

In college I was privileged to provide respite care for parents of an adorable toddler with blue eyes and blonde curls. Zach suffered from Canavan Disease, a debilitating genetic disorder that eventually claimed his muscle movement, his vision and his very breath. After graduation, my first job was to direct a non-profit organization, training respite care workers to give a break to both parents of severely disabled children and also spouses of homebound older adults. Because of Zach, I found a calling - representing caregivers badly in need of rest, describing their challenges to community groups as a way of raising awareness and funding for 'The Respite Care Program of Northwestern Minnesota.'

Here at David Lutheran, we have members who think that parents should have access to Christian Preschool education, that youngsters should gain life skills through scouting, that children should have the opportunity for faith to be nurtured in Sunday School. There are those who want no one to go hungry, so they stock the Food Pantry's shelves. Others want college students to not be so homesick and provide meals for Jacob's Porch, a ministry of our synod on the campus of ODU. There are others here who dream up special events like Corn Booths and Hoedown's to help us meet our neighbors... When have you been moved - by something or someone in need of urgent attention? How have your actions, your service, your ministry been shaped - by what or by whom you've noticed?

Last week we wrestled with Jesus' understanding that his actions would cause division. Today's gospel story provides a case study. Teaching at the invitation of a local synagogue leader, Jesus is moved with compassion at the arrival of a woman whose spine is painfully twisted. Notice that she makes no request to be healed. Jesus *chooses* to heal her. And his choice to heal her at once, on the spot - creates conflict.

We learn that the offended religious leader has no qualms about healing on six days of the week. But this woman's condition wasn't life threatening. She's learned to live with it for 18 years. So, he says, "No healing today. Just wait for the Sabbath to pass. She can wait a little longer."

The text describes Jesus calling a woman bent with a spinal disease out into the middle of the synagogue, laying hands on her to heal her from a 'spirit of weakness.' Respectfully, he calls her a 'daughter of Abraham.' Theologian Walter Wink, in his book *Engaging the Powers* notes this expression as unparalleled, one he's been unable to find in all of ancient Jewish literature. Addressing her in this way, Jesus makes her a full-fledged member of the covenant with equal standing before God. To touch her was to revoke the holiness code of purity laws separating people into prejudiced categories of clean and unclean, of 'us and them.' To place her in the middle of this public place of worship was to challenge the priestly monopoly on the means of grace and access to God. Mediterranean culture saw the outward appearance as a reflection of an inward reality – of either God's blessing or judgment. For Jesus to assert that her illness was not divine punishment for sin, but a symptom of oppression worthy of compassion was a direct challenge to a cultural misbelief.<sup>1</sup>

So this is not just a healing story. Nor is it another 'win for Jesus' in a social transaction imbedded in a culture based on honor versus shame. ***It's a story about the abundant life that Jesu came into this world came to bring. A story about what God intends for all of us. It's about the urgency of seeing God's righteous ways brought to pass without delay.***

The synagogue leader has misunderstood the basis for observing the Sabbath. Listen to the reasons for Sabbath keeping from the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy (5:12-15), an assertion of how much God values freedom and detests injustice. Keep in mind that the Hebrew meaning of the word Shabbat is 'to stop.'

*Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is (a stopping) a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.*

The original intent of the Sabbath is to provide relief, even if only temporary, from any system that would deny a person – or creature, or any part of creation – a share of rest, peace, wholeness, dignity and justice. The synagogue official says, "Wait just more day." Jesus answers, "No. The Sabbath is a pretty good day for setting people free. The purpose of the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1992, pp. 129-130.

Sabbath is to bring wholeness. We're not going to wait." "For crying out loud," says Jesus, "you release your own animals to give them basic care, but you want her to wait for relief?" This woman, Jesus calls 'a daughter of Abraham,' is one to whom God has expressed unambiguous favor.

In what ways are we like this woman who gradually became more and more crippled and endured this condition for years? Calamity strikes and life is changed. Sometimes we find ourselves diminished by sickness or addiction. Sometimes we cripple ourselves with the sins of our imprudent or immoral choices. Our lives, both as individuals and as whole communities can become both bent and broken by unjust systems that lock us in the bondage of suffering and fear.

In some cases, our theology becomes an obstacle preventing people of faith from acting to reform their culture. Those who are comfortable and privileged have little incentive to contribute to change. Sometimes, like the synagogue leader, a strong commitment to idealism and principle can lead us to a rigid rejection of good strategies for moving forward – because we insist on holding out for what we believe is the perfect solution. <sup>2</sup>

But Jesus places this woman's health and wellbeing above the obstacles of respect for tradition or principled adherence to the law. Jesus lifts up the intent of Sabbath as a gift to serve us - as God's children - and draws us more deeply into the abundant life God offers. We're all invited to place the law of love above all other laws. We're all called to reach out to help those in need around us to stand up a little taller when they hear and experience God's love through our words and actions. <sup>3</sup>

At the end of our story, we're told that Jesus' opponents were 'put to shame' in this conflict. There are a number of reversals we experience in the hearing of this tale. In her healing the woman is lifted from her shame of being seen as some kind of sinner deserving of her affliction. Jesus reminds people that even before her healing, she is honored as a member of the covenant community. By contrast, the honorable, respected leader is shamed, exposed in the hypocrisy of putting care for his animals ahead of compassion for a fellow human being. In both of these cases, it's Good News for us to hear that Jesus is always holding out his arms to us whether we are weighed down by shame, or mistaken about our priorities. Jesus opens his arms, inviting us to a new perspective, to new life, with renewed health and hope.

For there is no one who is beyond the love and grace of God. There are times we may identify with the woman – for at any point any of us can become disabled by accident, broken by illness, bent over by tragedy. There are any number of ways we may find ourselves outcast, afraid and alone. Or we may identify with the religious leader: respected, confident, doing just fine with the world we live in - but afraid, afraid to risk responding to God's unexpected and surprising ways of bringing healing.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Skinner, 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, <http://www.onscripture.com/why-we-can%E2%80%99t-wait>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://davidlose.net/2016/08/pentecost-14-c-dream-tenders/>.

Either way, Jesus reaches out to us in welcome, longing to free us from *whatever* that binds, to lead us into the adventure of new life in the wideness of God's love. So knowing this... what risk will you dream of taking - to bring God's rest and release, God's Sabbath, God's urgently needed justice - to people in your life, and to the world God loves? Amen