

Luke 13: 10-17 Law, Love, and Life

Last week, we listened to the puzzling words of Jesus, that he came to bring not peace but division to the earth. Jesus was calling out the false peace, the “peace the world gives” at the cost of the wellbeing of the vulnerable and the marginalized. Jesus names the division that is inevitable whenever God’s peace, the peace of the kingdom of heaven breaks into our earthly lives. There is something to that expression of heaven “breaking into” the earth’s brokenness.

Today’s pericope, the passage selected for today’s reading, ends with this sentence: ‘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. Again, Jesus’s action and teaching divides the people into those who oppose him and those who rejoice in what he was doing. What is at stake this time?’

My copy of the Bible here, the New Revised Standard Version, has a title for this passage. It’s not part of the original text but was added much later by the editors, and it says, “Jesus Heals a Crippled Woman.” At first glance, we might think it’s another healing miracle story. But only the first part of this passage is about Jesus healing the woman. The rest of the passage is about the angry reaction of the synagogue leaders, triggered by Jesus healing the woman on the sabbath, and Jesus in turn call out their hypocrisy. At the heart of the

argument is the observation of the Sabbath, which is one of the central commandments in the Jewish Law.

The synagogue leaders are very annoyed that Jesus violated this major law and healed the woman on Sabbath, because, in their understanding, the law prohibited doing any work, even healing, unless it was a matter of life or death. This woman? For 18 years she'd been living with her body bent over. What's one more day? Surely it wouldn't kill her if Jesus waited another day. They discerned, there is no urgency that justified Jesus's disobedience of the law. So, they grew indignant, and told the gathered crowd to come back another day to be healed.

The leaders of the synagogue were convinced Jesus disregarded this central law in the Law of Moses. But did he?

It is quite common for us Christians to think that the main difference between Judaism and Christianity is that the Judaism, or Jewish faith, depends on the strict observation of the Law of Moses, that it is a legalistic religion, and Jesus came to free people from all those laws that bound them, preaching forgiveness and mercy, that Christianity is the religion of love.

It is clear this is not the case, if we recall Psalm 103 Susanna read for us this morning; this is one of the most beautiful expressions of God's love.

It is also not the case that Jesus disregarded this central law as the leaders of the synagogue assumed. Let's take a closer look at the text.

At the beginning of the story, we learn that Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath. To be in the synagogue on the sabbath was to be at the heart of Judaism in its most widely practiced and its strongest form. Jesus was faithfully observing the law and ministering within Judaism. Earlier on in the Gospel, Luke tells us that going to the synagogue on the sabbath was Jesus's custom. And when Jesus was criticized that the behaviors of his disciples were breaking the sabbath law, Jesus said "the Son of Man is the Lord of Sabbath."

So, what divided Jesus and those leaders of the synagogue? Now let's take a closer look at the Sabbath, which is at the heart of their disagreement.

Where do we find the commandment about Sabbath? The Ten Commandments, which are central to all the instructions that God gave to God's people, the Israelites. And Sabbath is at the center of the Ten Commandment, coming between the first 4 commandments

which are about our relationship to God, and the last 5 commandments which are about how we are to treat one another, our relationship with the neighbor. The commandment on the Sabbath holds the balance of loving God and loving our neighbor, which is, of course, the great summary of the laws.

The Ten Commandments are first mentioned in Exodus Chapter 20, and they are repeated in Deuteronomy Chapter 5. What is curious is that when it comes to the sabbath law, the Ten Commandments in these two places understands it slightly differently.

First in Exodus, the Sabbath law is associated with God's work of creation: Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. 9For six days you shall labor and do all your work. 10But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. 11For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore, the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. So, that's the Sabbath law in Exodus. The logic here "God rested, so should you."

Now, listen to the Sabbath law in the Book of Deuteronomy: Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 13For six days you shall labor and do all your work.

14But the seventh day is 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. 15Remember 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.

Did you catch the difference? The commandment to not to do any work is there, but the law in Deuteronomy is grounded in God's liberating work of God's people out of the bondage in Egypt. It also mentions something the Exodus version does not, and that is "So that your male and female slave may rest as well as you." The fundamental reason for the rest is the restoration of life-energy and strength, not just you but those who are in your care. The logic here is "God liberated and restored you, so should you liberate and restore those in bondage." Also, only this version mentions donkey; a minor detail but it's a clue!

Now can you tell which version of the sabbath law the synagogue leaders were following and which one Jesus was following?

Responding to the synagogue leaders. He said: 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? 16And 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?’

In the original Greek, the word “untie” as in untie his ox or donkey, share the same root with the word “set free” as in set free from the bondage. Jesus clearly saw in this crippled woman someone who was in bondage and needed to be set free. In the original Greek text, the spirit that was crippling the woman is literally “the spirit of weakness, or infirmity.” She needed to be set free, be allowed to rest, to have her strength renewed. So, to keep the sabbath law, was to release her from the Satan’s grip in the spirit of weakness. That was the work of God on the sabbath, and so she praised God.

Both Jesus and the synagogue leaders were obeying the Law. Jesus fulfills the law because he understands that God’s Law to the people is God’s gift of Love, and it always leads to Life. Law, Love and Life: these 3 Ls are inseparable in the faithful practice of our faith. The synagogue leaders, on the other hand, failed to keep these 3 Ls together.

Jesus is the Lord of sabbath. It is interesting to note, in this passage, instead of simply saying “Jesus answered to them,” it is “the Lord answered to them.” This Jesus is our Lord and the head of our church. What liberating acts can the church perform to observe the sabbath? From what bondage are we called to set one another free?

By now many of you have heard me talk about my premature mid-life crisis. I became literally paralyzed due to the psychological distress. For many days, I was not able to get out of bed. When I did, I was extremely frail, physically and emotionally. I was like that crippled woman, with body stiff and bent over, as if I was frozen, like that woman who could not stand upright. Then, it was the local Presbyterian church in upstate New York, that took me in, all broken and frozen, and nursed me back to health with their loving care. The deacons took my daughter to their home after the Sunday service, while others took me to their home so I could rest. Their warm and tender love and care restored my strength.

This past week, I was attending a meeting of the Synod of the Southwest in Albuquerque. The Synod is the regional body of our denomination that supports the presbyteries within the region, and we the Santa Fe Presbytery belong to the synod of the Southwest. There, I found myself seated at the same table, face to face, with Rev. Craig Lindsey. Rev. Lindsey was the pastor of that church in upstate New

York that set me free from the bondage of my affliction. He had moved to serve a church Arizona and now we were brought together to serve on the same committee in the Synod of the Southwest. I'm the living witness; what his church did for me was the life-restoring work of the sabbath and the work of God. God be praised. Amen.