

BONDAGE

SHERARD EDINGTON

Luke 13:10-17

The story of the Hebrew people begins with God's call to Abraham and God's promise to make of Abraham a great nation of descendants. Abraham's son was Isaac. Isaac had Jacob. And Jacob had twelve sons. One of these was Joseph. Cruelly, Joseph's brothers sold Joseph into slavery, and he ended up in Egypt where he became the administrator over the entire nation. Eventually, Joseph's brothers and their families relocated to Egypt and settled there. Over the generations, they prospered and multiplied until the Egyptians took them as slaves and forced them into heavy labor. The Lord God YHWH heard the cries of these oppressed people and sent Moses to guide them to their freedom. Moses leads the people out of Egypt and toward a land that God had promised them. Their journey took them through the wilderness where God delivered to them his instructions on how they are to live in a covenantal relationship with God. We know these instructions as the Commandments.

One of these Commandments describes to us how, each week, we are to keep a sabbath day. As we read in the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, the Commandment says, *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 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.* (Deuteronomy 5)

The purpose of the sabbath day is not only to honor God but it is to serve as a reminder to the Hebrew people of how God freed them from their **bondage**. In fact, liberation is a fundamental characteristic of God's realm. God's realm means freedom—freedom from sin, freedom from oppression, freedom from death.

How does one "keep" the sabbath? Well, the practical application of keeping the sabbath became a focal point of Jewish law. What does it mean to honor the sabbath? How does a person faithfully observe the sabbath? The rabbis, seeking to answer these questions, developed a complex set of statutes on what one should and should not do on the sabbath. In essence, there is to be no work done on that day—no farming, no cooking, no cleaning, no carrying.

In our reading today from the Gospel of Luke, the practice of keeping the sabbath is again front and center. Jesus has been accused of breaking the sabbath. He responds by challenging the charges made against him. He asks his accusers, *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?* Of course, they do. An animal that is tied up cannot fend for itself. What sort of sabbath law would encourage the mistreatment of any creature?

Now, the reason that Jesus is challenged is that he has intentionally healed a woman in the synagogue, in front of witnesses, on the sabbath day. In other words, he performed a miracle in church.

Jesus and his disciples had been traveling through Galilee teaching and preaching. In one particular town he goes to the synagogue, as was his habit. It is the sabbath day and he is invited to teach. Now, this is not the temple in Jerusalem. This is just an ordinary synagogue in a small town.

And while he is teaching, a woman enters into the room. She is described as having a spirit within her—an evil spirit. And this spirit manifests itself by crippling her spine. She is bent over and unable to stand up straight. She had suffered this way for eighteen years.

When Jesus sees her there, he stops speaking and calls to her and she comes over to him. He says very simply, *Woman, you are set free from your ailment.* And then he lays his hands on her. Immediately the woman stands up straight, and, as you can imagine, she begins praising God. Who wouldn't? After all, for eighteen years, she had suffered this debilitating condition. And now she is free from its bondage.

You would imagine that the room would have exploded in joy at the sight of this woman being healed. She was likely a member of his very synagogue. The people there knew her story. Her neighbors knew how long she had suffered like this. They all knew that her condition was far beyond the abilities of any physician. And yet, all Jesus does is to tell her that she is set free from her ailment and to lay his hands on her and she is as good as new.

But not all in the room are delighted at this turn of events. The leader of the synagogue is *indignant* at what Jesus has done. The leader doesn't object to the healing itself, just that it had been performed on the sabbath. What Jesus had done is healing and healing is work, and work is prohibited. The man informs Jesus that there are plenty of days in the week to do work. He doesn't have to do this on the sabbath. Come back tomorrow and heal. We'll even throw a party. But just don't do this on the sabbath. That is forbidden.

Now, it is easy to belittle this leader for his seemingly narrow-mindedness. But I am sympathetic toward him. As a church leader, I get where he is coming from.

The leader of the synagogue is not a rabbi. He is a lay person. He is someone chosen by the congregation to serve as their head—their CEO. Today, synagogues have presidents. That is who this man is.

As leader/CEO/president, it is this man's duty to maintain the synagogue. The synagogue clearly didn't have a resident rabbi, so it likely fell to this person to lead worship. It is his responsibility to ensure the orthodox behavior of all in the synagogue. He knows the rules, especially the rules regarding the sabbath. There is to be no work done on the sabbath and healing is obviously work. If the leader allows healing to take place, then he is putting the community on a slippery slope. There is the Law, and for the good of the community, it is his job to enforce it. He is a good man doing what his tradition tells him is the right thing.

Jesus' response to the man's accusation is to point out the hypocrisy of this point of view. Yes, there are rules about not working on the sabbath. But at the same time there are exceptions. To the crowd, Jesus says, "You can take your animal to drink water on the sabbath. That is allowed. If, therefore, you are willing to show this small compassion to an animal, why can't you show a greater compassion to a human being?"

The argument can also be made that the woman was not in danger of dying. She had lived with this condition for eighteen years. What difference would one more day make? None.

But Jesus counters his accusers and reminds the people that this woman is one of them; she is a *daughter of Abraham*. She a person of faith, a child of God a member of the covenant community. And she had been *bound by Satan for eighteen long years*. Yes, she can wait on more day. But why? Why extend her anguish one more hour? "If you don't torment your donkey, why do you choose to torment this woman? Why not set her free now?" And what better day than the sabbath.

Through the gospels, we read of Jesus's many acts of healing and liberation—liberation from blindness, disability, evil spirits, disease, sin, even death. Each of these acts of power provides us a glimpse into the glory of God's realm. Jesus' words are not only prophetic, they are emancipatory.

And Jesus doesn't let sabbath worship get in the way of his act of healing. He doesn't say "I can't help you right now. I'm busy worshiping the Lord." No. He stops what he is doing because healing this woman is worship. We've discussed this over the past two weeks as we looked at passages from the prophet Isaiah. Remember in Isaiah how God says, *I hate your worship*. God says this because the people weren't living lives of justice and righteousness. Their worship was hollow and meaningless.

Worship must be partnered with acts of compassion. Jesus interrupts worship for the very purpose of showing compassion, of demonstrating God's realm.

We are good at worshiping on the sabbath. But as we worship, it is important for us to ask if we are doing anything that might hinder the work of Jesus. Do we have any traditions or rules or statutes that inhibit people from praising God?

Let me tell a story that a colleague shared with me many years ago. He had recently begun serving a small, rural Presbyterian church. The church was fairly well-to-do because it was situated in the middle of horse country. The new pastor had naturally attracted new visitors including one man who became the subject of discussion at a session meeting. It seems that members of the session were upset because this man didn't dress particularly well and because he wore a baseball cap in worship. It was the hat that really bothered people. The pastor let the session talk about how they should address this matter. He finally spoke up and told them why the man wore the cap. The man had already approached the preacher and apologized for his appearance. He knew that he was not as well-attired as the rest of the congregation. But he worked a night shift and he came to church straight from work. He didn't have time to go home. This church almost rejected someone from their Christian community over a hat. Their expectations for worship were holding them hostage. They saw the man as broken when in fact they were ones needing healing.

I tell this story and again pose the question, Do we have any traditions or rules or expectations that inhibit people from worshipping God?

Our reading concludes with the crowd *rejoicing at all the wonderful things that Jesus was doing*. They recognized that their world was changing, that this man was bringing God's realm into focus for them, a realm that had seemed so far away. They could see the freedom from bondage that was now before them. And they rejoiced.