

## Right Thing, Wrong Time?

Hebrews 12:22-29 Crossroads Christian Church

Luke 13:10-17

August 21, 2016 Pentecost 14C

I didn't grow up in a church-going family, so Sunday for us was usually just a nice, relaxing day. The Sunday comics were a highlight of the morning. Sometimes we'd go for a scenic drive, or to visit relatives, and maybe that evening we'd all pile in the car for a trip to the drive-in movie. When I started going to church, along about fifth grade, I enjoyed my Sunday school class, and its caring teacher, and enjoyed going into the sanctuary and hearing the music and the message, and was fascinated by the stories of Jesus. That would eventually lead me to being a church nerd.

Some of my relatives had a more strict view of Sundays—it was a day of rest. You went to church, you had a nice dinner, but you were supposed to spend the rest of the day being holy. I still remember an incident when I was in junior high school. I had a really nice man as teacher of the Sunday school class at First Christian in Grand Junction, Colorado. The day came that he had to move away, though, and as a going-away gift to the class, he took us all to a Sunday matinee of a movie—"Love is a Many Splendored Thing." My Pentecostal cousins were aghast, and were absolutely sure that this teacher was going to be consigned to Hell ASAP. They believed that all movies were evil, anyway, and that for a Sunday school teacher to lead his class on the road to sin and degradation, and to do it on the Sabbath? Well, what would happen if Jesus came back to earth while we there in that movie house? The thought crossed my irreverent little mind that I would be glad to share my popcorn with him.

People can have strong ideas and communities can have strong expectations about what's appropriate behavior on holidays, or holy days. Christians borrowed the idea of holy time from our Jewish ancestors, obviously because we're an offshoot of Judaism. Sometimes we borrow the Jewish terminology and call our holy day, Sunday, the Sabbath. However, the Jewish Sabbath is on the last day of the week, going from Friday sundown to Saturday sundown, because the Jewish way of keeping time count days beginning with the setting sun. Why? Because in Genesis 1:5, it says, "God called the light day and the darkness night. And there was evening and morning, the first day." Christians, after they moved out of the synagogues, began to worship on the first day of the week of the Roman calendar, because that was the day of Resurrection.

Our Gospel lesson is one of many stories in the Gospels of Jesus that follows a pattern. Jesus does something, usually a healing, on the Sabbath, and the Jewish faithful get concerned because he's violating the law by working on the Sabbath. Jesus does good on the Sabbath. Jewish leaders say he broke the law. Jesus justifies his actions—a pattern.

Now it's easy to blame the Jewish teachers for legalism. They were always wrong for being so narrow minded, and Jesus was always right. But let's look at it from the Jewish perspective, and try to understand them. For Jews, Sabbath was—and is—a blessing and a gift. God had worked for six days, and rested on the seventh, and now God allowed God's children that same gift. When the Hebrews were in

exile in Egypt, they didn't have a day off. Slaves didn't have days off. One day just ran right into the other—work, work, work, with no end in sight, except for the release of death. So when they got free, having a day off was a big deal. Even more than a day off, it was a holy day.

David Lose, a Lutheran seminary president, puts it this way. "Sabbath is a day for rest and renewal, and the rather negative view we take toward the various "restrictions" associated with the Sabbath would have been very foreign to the Israelites. ... when they receive a command to rest -- to actually set aside one day of the week to rest their bodies and their livestock and retreat for a time of renewal and prayer -- trust me, they heard this only as good news."<sup>1</sup> (unquote)

Other religions had holy places, like temples or shrines, but the Jews had holy time—the Sabbath—and they took great care to protect that day as a day of rest, devoted to God. They knew that if you allowed exceptions, the whole meaning of the day would slip away.

If you want to see how the Jewish law was seen as a gift, not a burden, go to Psalm 119, the longest Psalm in the Bible. It goes on for 176 verses, and it's an acrostic poem with one major theme. "Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all day long." (verse 97)

So with that in mind, let's look at the story. First of all, note that Jesus was honoring the Sabbath by teaching in the synagogue. Jesus and his disciples studied and worshiped regularly at synagogues on the Sabbath day. They were loyal, observant, Jews.

Whatever Jesus was saying at the time, whatever words he was saying that might have rung in the heart of his listeners, he stopped. Something else—someone else—was more important. Jesus' heart was filled with pity when he saw a woman, bent at the waist, obviously used to having to walk, year after year, with her back in that position.

Jesus called to her. "Woman, you are set free from your sickness." He placed his hands on her, and she straightened up to her full height.

Again, Anna Murdock puts it so well in a poem.

OH WOMAN, DEAR NAMELESS WOMAN  
(ponderings on Luke 13:10-17)

Oh woman, dear nameless woman,  
Your life isn't as it should be.  
What has held your head down?  
What has bent your back and heart  
so severely?

What has burdened you so, dear woman,  
that you are bent over ...  
that you are unable to stand straight ...

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, Working Preacher.org, August 21, 2016

that you cannot look  
into the eyes of others?  
What has shackled you  
in this position?

Is it poverty or abuse?  
Has all sense of worth  
been stripped from you?  
Have the cruelties of life  
spit upon you and mocked you?  
Have you been used by men to the point  
of losing your own name?  
Has death taken the very ones  
who would have taken care of you?

Oh woman, nameless woman,  
how your heart must long  
to look into the eyes of others once more;  
to seek hope and acceptance and love.  
But alas, you cannot, can you?  
Your head cannot be lifted.  
For whatever reasons,  
it is bent low.  
You see only the dust of the streets  
and the feet of those  
who step over you  
and around you  
and on you.

Oh woman, dear bent-low woman,  
God has brought you to this place,  
to this synagogue,  
to this person who is teaching  
freedom from bondage.  
On this day ...  
yes, on this very Sabbath day  
you will be set free  
and will stand tall  
once more.

You must sense this hope, don't you?  
You made such a great effort to come.  
You risked being turned away  
by the leaders  
as being one so nameless  
that you would be in their way ...  
a mere nuisance in their day.  
But you have come to this place.

Dear woman,  
is this a last hope for you?

He has called you,  
not by name, but "Woman".  
Even before his touch,  
even before you might stand tall  
he proclaims that those things  
that had kept your head low  
and your back so bent  
be gone forever.

Did you hear his words, dear woman?  
SET FREE!  
Set free from all of the  
bent-down bondage!  
His eyes are the first eyes  
that you have seen in so long.  
How can you not respond  
in the way that you do!  
Standing straight ... Praising God!

Oh woman, dear nameless woman,  
Have you heard his name for you?  
"Daughter of Abraham".  
Your great faith has given you  
such a glorious name  
and this man,  
the one they call Jesus,  
has seen your faith,  
even in your crippled posture.  
What a beautiful name you now have!<sup>2</sup> (unquote)

Of course, no good deed goes unpunished, and the president of the synagogue—that would be the equivalent of a lay board chair, responded, "Each week has six days when we can work. Come and be healed on one of those days, but not on the Sabbath." (v.14) Jesus called them hypocrites—play actors or pretenders. It was all right under the law to take care of your animals, to tend to their basic needs, so why not heal a woman who had spent 18 years burdened and bent?

The Sabbath was good and is good. It's good to spend time to reflect and be refreshed. It's good to spend time to learn and to worship, to set aside the common cares of life. But when an opportunity comes to transform a life, Jesus said, you can't pass it up. Many times I've told nurses and doctors and other caregivers who have to work on Sunday that their work is worship, too. We can

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<sup>2</sup> (c)2013 anna Murdock, in post to midrash.org,  
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enjoy our Sunday routines, but when love brings an opportunity to touch someone else's life in a healing and reconciling way, we can't pass it up. Amen.

by Michael E. Dixon