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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
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Luke 13:10-17
“Sabbath Justice”

Sabbath is a hard concept to grasp. In an age where we can hardly resist answering a message on our BlackBerries while we’re eating dinner with our families, we have a hard time obeying a command to rest. If we’re able to allow Sabbath to creep into our lives for a few hours on a Sunday afternoon while we read the newspaper on the front porch we consider ourselves lucky – and maybe even a little faithful for resisting the urge to label ourselves lazy. Sabbath is not an easily reinforced concept in the culture of our present day: not only are businesses open on Sunday these days, but with so much to *do*, it is just hard to give ourselves permission to stop.

Frankly, for as many times as we remembered that God rested on the seventh day of creation, or reviewed our Ten Commandments in Sunday school, we may find that the Sabbath is a pretty foreign concept to us. Unless we are blessed with Jewish friends or relatives who have included us in their Sabbath observance, we might struggle to identify a tradition of Sabbath-keeping in our lives. How does one rest when there is so much that needs to be done?

Our scripture passage this morning shows that this is not a dilemma just of our day. When those whom are deemed authorities on the subject of Sabbath cannot agree on what should be done, we know we’re in trouble! The commandment reads:

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. For 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.¹

In today’s scripture passage, we read that Jesus and the leader of the temple disagree about how to apply this teaching. While it’s easy to read our Gospel as Jesus dismissing the letter of the law, in fact both are striving to identify what sort of behavior, what sort of practice, most faithfully honors this command.

In our reading of this text, it’s easy to take on a spirit of dualism in our interpretation. It’s easy to say: Jesus was right, the temple leader was wrong. It’s easy to say grace = good; law = bad – just as it’s easy to say there is a clear right and a clear wrong in the story. It’s easy then, to walk away with a “clear” understanding that the law is bad and compassion

¹ Deuteronomy 5:12-15, New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

is good. What we forget is that the story is about two teachers trying to be faithful, doing their best to honor God and to observe God's commandment

If we take a look at this text from the temple leader's perspective, we can see that he has some standing in this conflict. First, this woman's affliction is *not* life-threatening. She has, after all, lived with her condition for 18 years. This man is not suggesting that a woman be left to bleed to death by the side of the road – he is just asking that she wait for a few hours to be healed. This leader's suggestion of a “both|and” solution is for Jesus to heal the woman, but to wait until the Sabbath is over.

Jesus presents us with a “both|and” solution of his own. His response, in fact, is not dismissing the command to honor the Sabbath or saying that such an observance is unimportant. After all, this whole scenario takes place at the temple where he has come to pray and to teach, keeping his Sabbath observance. His healing of the woman – freeing her from the bondage of her physical affliction – is his way of honoring the command in Deuteronomy. For he hears not only the first part of the command – about observing the Sabbath – but also the command as it continues: about enabling all of creation to be free to rest, to be free to worship. As much as we might wish it were, Jesus is not offering us a free pass to stay busy on the Sabbath, but rather an encouragement to re-think our Sabbath theology and practice in our own lives.

Jesus is calling us to live into the *fullness* of this Sabbath command, a command whose richness is about far more even than personal rest, but in fact issues a call to justice. Barbara Brown Taylor writes:

Sabbath is the true God's gift to those who wish to rest and to be free – and who are willing to guard those same gifts for every living thing in their vicinity as well. Remember the commandment? It's not just for you. It is for your children, your employees, your volunteer helpers, your hunting dogs, your plow horses, your fields, and your migrant workers. It does not matter in the least whether they believe in your God. You do, so they get the day off. Anyone who engages this practice discovers saving habits of work and rest that promise life not only for each of us individually but also for our families, our communities, our far-flung neighbors, our systems of justice, our human economies, and our planet.²

Sabbath is about freedom – the freedom from our labors, the freedom to *trust* God. Sabbath is about the freedom to know that all that we have is NOT of our own making, and that while our labors may participate in our own and other's well-being, life itself and our many blessings are gifts from a gracious, generous God. The Sabbath command to rest frees us from our labors to worship God; it invites us to take a step back from all that clouds our vision and enjoy the beauty of God's creation and likewise see the beauty of who God is. What's more, the Sabbath command ***claims that right for everyone***: for you, for all whose labors meet your needs; for your animals, even for the land . . . for all of creation.

² Taylor, Barbara Brown. *An Alter in the World*. P 134.

This is hard to grasp for many of us “busy bees” whose labor is a labor of love, whose identity is tied so directly to the work we do at our jobs, in our homes, or in our communities. This is hard to grasp for those of us struggling to earn a living and know that there is a direct correlation between every hour we work and the money in our pockets, who rely on our labor for food. This is hard to grasp for many of us who were raised with a Protestant work ethic and feel guilty resting from our work when there is so much that needs to be done.

The woman was freed from her affliction not because her affliction would have brought her a physical death. Rather, Jesus freed her – the Greek uses the word for “release” – from that which has bound her, from that which has held her back from the fullness of life, from that which has held her back from worshipping God. The best way to worship God was to free another of God’s children from the bondage that held her back from her own Sabbath rest and worship.

We know this woman. We might *be* this woman. We can all name those whose postures are bent over under the weight of the world: those who are in physical pain that does not allow them to stand up straight; bent over under the weight of an addiction; bent over under the weight of depression; bent over under the weight of negative words that have shaped their identity; bent over from opportunities and affection withheld. We know those who are bent over under the weight of grief; bent over under the weight of financial strain; bent over in fear; bent over in stress and worry. Sure they – or we – might be able to bear up under this strain for some time – for years, or decades maybe. They, *we*, might be so familiar with this posture that it might even seem normal.

We are called to Christ’s Sabbath justice. ***We are called to this “both|and” solution that sees the fulfillment of God’s law as stemming from acts of loving kindness that acknowledges not only the inherent worth of all of God’s children, but the necessity of each of them to be released from their burdens and freed to love their Creator.***

How do we rest and free? How do we honor the Sabbath in these two ways? I admit, it’s not always clear-cut. What I do know is that **we have to do both**. One of the tricks is to live into the Sabbath theology **every day**: to approach God with a sense of trust and gratitude every day and to then view our life of faith as one in which we partner with Christ to invite all of creation into the freedom offered by our loving God of life. If you need more help learning about this life, there’s lots more to study in scripture – from creation to the Exodus, to the Jubilee teachings in Leviticus, to the healings of Christ.

But the other trick is to give ourselves permission to partake in a Sabbath rest. ***For it is only if we view this as an essential for ourselves – something we need like water and bread and love – that we will honor this opportunity for others.*** Just as we are called to ensure that our ability to rest is not born on the backs of others, we are likewise called to rest. We must experience the freedom to be church, to be God’s people, to experience God’s grace and, in gratitude, to worship God. When in doubt, remember that love and life trump bondage and death, for the greatest commandment is to love.

And when all is said and done, may we cling to the knowledge that it is not through our works, after all, but through God's grace that any of us experience this Sabbath freedom. For it is through Christ, who came to free us from the bondage of sin and death, that the justice of God's redemptive love is freely offered to us, that we might have life and have it abundantly. Thanks be to God.

Amen