

**March 6, 2016**

**TEXT: Luke 13:10–17**

**TITLE: You are Set Loose**

I'll share a secret with you: there's a mistake in the first stained glass window there on my right. The window shows Moses holding the Ten Commandments. Before you leave today, go look at the window and think about what you learned about Roman numerals in grade school and you'll find the mistake. I'm mentioning the Ten Commandments because it is commandment #4 that is at the heart of the controversy in today's gospel lesson. Which one is the Fourth Commandment? "Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy."

Here's another secret for you: The Ten Commandments appear twice in the Old Testament: Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Listen to what the second version says about Commandment #4: *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 daughter, your male or female slave, your ox, donkey or any of your livestock, or the immigrant in your towns, so that all 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.*

Now here's where things get a bit complicated. In the creation story in Genesis 2, it says that when God finished the work of creation, God rested on the seventh day and made that day holy. But Deuteronomy 5 suggests that the Sabbath is a day to remember how God rescued us from bondage when we were slaves in Egypt. Is the Sabbath a day of rest like that end of the first week of creation, or is it a day of rest and remembrance, calling to mind how God rescues us from bondage? Both have value, yet there are conflicting opinions about which approach is preferable.

Ben Franklin told a parable about how even the simplest things can lead to conflicting opinions. He described a father and son traveling down the road with their donkey. When the father rode and the son walked, a passerby criticized the man for making his young son do the walking. They switched places and another person criticized the young man for riding and not giving the place of honor to his aged parent. They both got on the donkey and were criticized for putting an impossible burden on the poor beast. They both got off and were criticized for being foolish by not riding an animal that was meant to carry loads. In the end, they threw the donkey off a bridge. The moral of the story was "It is foolish to try to avoid all criticism."<sup>1</sup>

Let's set aside for a moment these differing opinions on how to keep the Sabbath holy and consider the unnamed woman at the heart of this healing miracle controversy. We know almost nothing about her except that she has been stooped over for 18 years. Think of the strain and discomfort she's had to endure, trying to walk or carry things or function in a world designed for those who can run and walk straight and tall. And on a

more symbolic level, imagine what it is like only to see the ground in front of you, not to be able to look people in the face or to stare in wonder at the sky or evening stars. People in ancient times wrongly considered physical infirmities a mark of God's disfavor. So along with the physical pain the woman endured, she also carried the burden of being treated as a spiritual outcast. To a criticizing world, both her body and soul were distorted and there was nothing she could do about it.

Think for a moment how intimately connected your body and your spirit are. When you are well, you can think; you can work; you can laugh and pray and nurture an attitude of gratitude toward life. When you are ill or in pain, it is hard to do any of those things. You can hardly work or follow a train of thought, much less laugh or smile or feel like praying except to beg God to make you healthy again. Estimates are that between 10-20% of Americans suffer from daily, chronic pain such as lower back pain, arthritis, headaches, fibromyalgia, and others. Constant pain leads to stress and irritability; it damages relationships and self-esteem. People turn to doctors and medicine for help. They also turn to things like acupuncture, yoga, massage, physical exercise, breathing exercises and meditation, which have been shown to be effective in managing pain. These things are basically God's toolkit when you are broken or in pain. Medical care, antibiotics, exercise, Sabbath rest and meditation: as it says in James 1:17 "every good and perfect gift comes from above."

Staying well is a body thing and a spirit thing. That's why Jesus called forth the stooped-over woman in the synagogue, whose posture kept her on the margins of life and he healed her. He set her free, bodily and spiritually. We know this is true because her first response wasn't to do a jumping jack and then run off. Her first response was to praise God. She was fully healed, able to look up to heaven like everyone else; say prayers and make eye contact with others again; and shrug off the backbreaking prejudices that claimed she was a second-class citizen in the kingdom of God. Now she could go forth to love and serve the Lord as the good Lord intended.

But here's where things got interesting. Having dealt with the woman's pain in the back, Jesus had to deal with a religious leader who was a pain in the neck. He criticized Jesus for healing the woman on the Sabbath since that was seen as doing work on a day in which work was forbidden. He made a big show of turning to the gathered crowd and pontificating, "Look, there are six days for work. Pick one of those for healing the woman and not do it on the Sabbath. She's been bent over for 18 years; surely she can wait one more day." But Jesus would have none of this pious legalism. Jesus had not been plowing a field or building a table and chairs; he had not done work in that sense of the word. He had simply whisked away a burden, unbound a crippled daughter of Abraham, shown mercy and set free a child of God just as the Lord had set free the Israelites from Egypt long before.

When Jesus spoke to the woman, our English translation has him saying, "You are set free." But the verb can also be translated "You are set loose," which I much prefer. "You are set free" highlights the end of the pain and infirmity. "You are set loose" emphasizes that this woman is able to re-enter the world and set loose to be a living, challenging

witness to the true power of God. Despite the legalism around Sabbath rules, she will be a daily reminder to everyone in her community about what takes precedence over mere rules. Despite people in power wanting to control others and maintain an unjust status quo, she will be a living witness to God's insistence that the first will be last, the last first, and the way things are is not the way God in Christ intends for things to be.

When Frederick Douglass used to offer reading classes on Sundays, the slaves had to sneak around to attend them, because their masters would get upset that they were not spending the Sabbath wrestling, boxing and drinking whiskey but instead were trying to learn how to read the word of God. As Douglass said, "they had much rather see us engaged in those degrading sports than to see us behaving like intellectual, moral and accountable beings."<sup>2</sup> Douglass' educational work was done on a Sabbath not so long ago in American history not just to set people free, but to set them loose.

Here's one last secret for you. There's a big difference between being set free and being set loose. Every life involves times of joy and sorrow, health and sickness. There are seasons of pain, even long seasons of chronic pain, depression or being weighed down by a burden that makes you feel like the crippled woman staring at people's shoes for 18 years. There are some things you can do that will make you feel better. And in that moment, you will likely feel like you've been set free. But Christ comes into our life to do more than set you free, more than make things better. Christ came to set you loose. The slaves taught to read by Frederick Douglass were now active, moral agents changing a sinful, racist society simply by being loose in the world. The woman healed in the synagogue praised God as soon as she stood up, and wherever she went after that, she physically and verbally could tell about Christ the Savior who was the true Lord of the Sabbath.

Being loose in the world means the status quo is forever challenged by the already-but-not-yet vision of God's new reality, revealed in Christ. Hypocrisy has its mask of false power torn away. Brokenness prolonged and suffering tolerated have their feeble justifications swept into the dustbin of history. Christ came to set you loose for freedom, for justice, for God's beloved community. Come, prepare to receive what Christ offers today. You'll need it once you leave this place and find your way out loose in the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Isaacson, Benjamin Franklin, "An Apology to Printers," p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Douglass' "Slaveholding Religion and the Christianity of Christ;" referenced in Feasting on the Word, Luke 13:10-17, Exegetical essay by Rodney Sadler Jr., p. 387.