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The Healing of the Sabbath – Luke 13:10-17

Where Jesus is, things begin to be made right. That's cause for celebration, and there's a double dose today; but the most obvious and striking is the healing of the woman. What a passage – this is one of the most powerful healing stories of Jesus' ministry. Here's a person who suffered for as long as she can remember, bent nearly double, a prisoner in her own body. Jesus, from one moment to the next, called her out of the crowd and set her free. After eighteen years of prayer and attendance at the synagogue, one touch, one word from Jesus and – boom!

A professor, who teaches at my seminary, but whom I don't know personally, writes that he once came across a doctor who had decided to try to diagnose the diseases of Jesus "patients," and had determined from his reading of this account that the woman suffered from spondyloarthritis, specifically ankylosing spondylitis, which, untreated, leaves the vertebrae of the back and neck fused together, bent and twisted. She literally couldn't stand up straight without breaking her back.

It just so happens that this professor himself suffers that exact same condition – and while the reliability of the doctor’s remote diagnosis is somewhat tentative, it was enough for the professor to stop short and think to himself, “I am that woman.” Suddenly, the familiar text became alive and very, very personal.

Even if we don’t have ankylosing spondylitis, in one way or another, we are this woman, too. We may not have this terrible disease, but we do suffer from life, which at least at this point is terminal. In my few years here I know some of you who have gone from tennis and golf and hiking to walking, moving more slowly, using a cane or walker, gradually recalibrating your world to fit new and unasked-for limits.

The message of Jesus’ miraculous act here has two parts, and both have to do with healing. His words, accompanied by his call to her, her response in coming to him, and his laying his hands on her, freed her – in the words of the old King James Bible, “Woman, thou are loosed!” Loosed - healed, freed from the prison her body had become, and able to return to a life she’d long ago left behind. That’s healing number one, and it’s probably not too much to say that we would all like to be set free to return to the bodies we had back when, that we’d like a similar moment with Jesus, not just spiritual, but physical and physician-like. To have Jesus call you out of the crowd and lay hands on you!

I've been with you long enough to have seen a few miracles, too – but they're not for everyone. They – and when they occur – are a mystery we can't access as readily as the modern-day professor can access a medical relief, never dreamed of by the people of Jesus' community, for his own situation.

But there's a second healing here, one that is very much available to all of us, in fact given to us right now, and which may well be the real heart of this lesson for us: Jesus heals the Sabbath. Remember? This healing took place on the Jewish Sabbath.

Now, it may seem strange to talk about a day of rest to people who mostly live in a retirement community, but it's absolutely critical for our spiritual welfare that we do so, because the Sabbath is – has always been – one of the most important gifts of God to humankind, and one of the most thoroughly ignored, especially by Christians.

A bit of background. The Sabbath was, as a day of the week, what we call Saturday, the last day of the week, even on most calendars today. Anybody know why? That's right: in Genesis, it is the day of the week on which God rested after creation, and it's remembered first of all for that reason. There remain seven days in our week even now because of this Biblical chronology – and it's one of the reasons why the number “seven” is significant in Hebrew numerology: it connotes completeness,

wholeness, a perfect set, just as God looked with satisfaction at creation and blessed it – including his rest.

Sunday, the first day of the week as the Gospel of John calls it, is the day of the Resurrection, and became the Christian Sabbath for that reason. So, celebrating Jesus' resurrection, that's when we have our main public worship service (unless you're a Seventh-Day Adventist, or do what Roman Catholics call "anticipated" worship on Saturday evening – which, by the way, is really Sunday in Hebrew thought – the day begins with evening, not at midnight or dawn).

But right away, no matter which day was the Sabbath, how to observe it became a problem. You see, keeping the Sabbath holy is one of the Ten Commandments, the flashing-red-warning-light-you-must-obey orders from God. In fact, if you were to measure the importance of the Ten Commandments by the number of words in them, the command to keep the Sabbath holy is fully one-third of the total. So, if you want to keep most of them, you've got a great start by observing this one! And the Ten Commandments tell us very clearly how to keep the Sabbath holy: by complete rest. No work whatsoever; we are to rest as God rested.

But Jesus doesn't seem to have cared much for the restrictions that naturally sprung up to answer burning questions like, what is work? In fact, he seems to have taken great care to not care too much about it, to

flaunt his disregard for the details that interpret Sabbath-keeping, and that's made things tricky from his day right on down to now.

Most of us remember "Blue Laws" – the civil laws that kept stores and other useful places closed on Sundays. There aren't many left, are there? And how many of you grew up in homes where you only ate cold, previously-prepared food on Sundays? Anyone? Some of you may have even gone to church two or even three times on Sundays. Why? Because at least some Christians, knowing that God commanded that the Sabbath be a day of rest, legislated that no work be done on that day, and that everyone remember that even God rested.

Apple Cross. Jesus broke some of the 412 rules derived from the Sabbath commandment, usually with great relish and display. It's really one of the main reasons the authorities were out to get him.

And we, in our wisdom over the centuries, have decided that what Jesus was doing was scraping that commandment off the tablets of the Law of God. That's been a quite useful interpretation in modern times especially: given us a whole day, in fact, for us to keep on working.

But Jesus also said, when he was challenged on his apparent disregard for God's Laws, that "I have not come to abolish the Law, but fulfill it." (Mt 5: 17)

So, what's going on here? Well, like I said, Jesus healed the Sabbath. Not just in this passage, but in every place where he broke the

rules of the human society and upheld the law – the grace – of the Kingdom of God.

That silly Scots story I told a moment ago carries another of Jesus' sayings: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." (Mk 2:27) Now, I'm just quoting: there's nothing gender-specific about the meaning of his statement. The Sabbath may be a reminder of God's day of rest, but it is itself intended to be a day of rest, a gracious gift of the creator of the universe to those he created.

So, what I suggest this lesson and other events like it in Jesus' ministry are really advocating is a return to the Sabbath, the reclaimed, *healed* Sabbath of Jesus: a time of rest and appreciation of God's gift and God's gifts, not a hammer to cause more suffering than is already in the world. There's a book that came out a few months ago (which we'll be offering a study about) written by a physician, who became a Christian as an adult. It's called "24/6." That's right, 24/6, not 24/7. In it, the author, Matthew Sleeth, an Emergency Physician of all things, argues from a Biblical, theological and medical standpoint that God's gift of a day of "must-have" rest is not an option, that we can take or leave at our pleasure; it is essential to our faith, our spirit, and our health.

Now, we pastors – like doctors – are famous for our disregard of the frailty of these earthen vessels called bodies (even though, as you all know, we only work one hour a week, and even that's God's work, so it

doesn't count). But before John Dunham's retirement, he and Diane and I covenanted – made a promise to each other – we would make sure that we managed, somehow, by the grace of God probably, to take time for rest. And, despite some transgressions, which are mostly mine and for which I am profoundly sorry, we have striven to do just that.

And right now, I'm putting you on notice that I – and Diane and Mary Beth and Valerie and George and Lance (that's all the pastors we have on staff either as paid or volunteers) – we all expect you to do the same.

Again, sounds odd to talk about rest in a retirement community. But face it, you don't rest anywhere near as much as God says we should. So take a day off, once a week. Don't do chores, don't run errands, just rest. I know that some of you can't – for reasons I think Jesus would approve. We pastors would all love it if you spent at least some of that time in prayer, reading spiritual books, the Bible, or just contemplating the goodness of God and the love of Christ, but that's probably a bit much to ask of you on the first pass. Maybe next week.

One more thing: it's easy to miss, but the woman Jesus restored from bent and crippled to straight and tall didn't ask to be healed, nor did anyone ask Jesus for help on her behalf. Jesus *called her to him*. Jesus acts on us despite ourselves, our reluctance to step into the spotlight, our unwillingness to bother him or our resistance to his call.

God gave us this gift of rest, which had become, like so many rules, a law unto itself, itself a creator of new rules, stealing away grace and love in the name of holiness. It was Jesus, the son of God, sent to reconcile us back to him, who had to come and heal not just bodies, but souls – and the Sabbath, our day of rest. So. When was the last time you rejected a gift from someone you love? Go take a nap.