

Luke 13:10-17

What's going on in today's Gospel reading? On the surface, it seems pretty simple. Jesus is the good guy, who heals a crippled woman on the Sabbath. The synagogue leader is the "bad guy", who interprets this healing as work, which breaks the law. Jesus shames his opponents, and the crowd rejoices. We know that later on, those same temple leaders will plot against Jesus and have him killed. Nice and simple. Amen.

Well, maybe not.

First, what is this law that Jesus was accused of breaking? From Deuteronomy, we find this as part of what we call the "ten commandments", with the NRSV reading as:

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.

In Jesus' time, these laws were just as important, if not more so, to the Jewish people as those imposed by the Roman government. In our own time, we might think these kind of religious laws outdated, but in fact, more than half of the states still have so-called "blue laws" that prohibit certain activities on Sundays. Most of these are related to alcohol sales, and interestingly, automobile sales.

So, why did God give God's people this commandment, or any of the others mentioned in the Old Testament? God's laws are a gift to show God's people how to live in harmony with each other and

with creation. They are not intended to be a burden, adding tasks for people who already have difficult lives. Nor are they a checklist of do's and don'ts for getting into heaven. God wants all people to have life, and have it abundantly, here on earth.

God knows that everything in creation needs time to rest. This includes ourselves, our neighbors near and far, animals, and even the land itself. Farmers have known for a long time that planting the same crop year after year will wear out the soil, so they will apply crop rotation practices, or even allow fields to lie fallow in order to recover. People who work long shifts, or too many days in a row, without a true time to rest become less productive and more likely to make mistakes. So God commands that there be a day of rest for all, regardless of station or status.

The second part of the Sabbath commandment is also important, though it is often left off lists of the ten commandments: "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". For the Jewish people, the Sabbath is a day to remember that the Lord freed them from bondage in Egypt. For Christians, we have Sunday as our Sabbath to remember the day when Jesus was raised and freed us from bondage to sin and death.

The woman in today's gospel lesson was bound by a crippling disease for eighteen long years. What would Sabbath rest have meant to her? Every day she was a slave to this illness, unable to participate fully in society, probably undesirable as a wife, literally looked down on by everyone, practically invisible. And even so, Jesus saw her and He called her over. "Woman, you are set free". When confronted, Jesus asks that if it is ok to untie an ox or donkey to lead it to water, then is even not more important that the woman be set free? Incidentally, the same Greek word in the original text is translated as both untie and set free. (Thanks internet.)

Who among us today is unable to obtain sabbath rest even for a few hours, let alone an entire day every week? We have neighbors in our own communities, perhaps in our own congregations, who may be working two jobs just to meet the basic needs of their family. What is our duty as Christians to work to help ensure that all of God's children have the freedom needed for sabbath rest?

We could argue that the synagogue leader was also bound. He was bound by such a rigid interpretation of the law that he may have forgotten the part about being set free. After all, they were hardly free under Rome's rule, and those original laws helped them keep their identity as a people. Any talk of "freedom" was risky in those days. The synagogue leaders did have the authority to interpret the law, but that was no guarantee that their interpretation was what God intended. Like most people when confronted with a truth they don't like, the temple authorities consistently dug in even deeper, in the end condemning the messenger because they didn't like the message.

How do we know whether we are doing it right? Which laws are still relevant, and how are we to correctly interpret their meaning for today's world? Who would Jesus call hypocrite today for holding on to a strict interpretation of scripture that only serves to exclude, while themselves routinely ignoring other commandments? Because, as Christians, our identity does not come from the law, but from our faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

In the end, remember that God's commandments are life-giving gifts. They are not meant for condemnation, or for excluding certain people or groups. As Christians, we are called to love God, and to love our neighbor, as Christ Himself does, without judgment, and without exception. If we can manage that even little bit, we can help bring healing to each other, and to a world that so desperately needs it.

Amen.