

Year C Proper 21 Straighten Up and Rejoice! Luke 13 10 to 17

She had gotten used to looking at people out of the corner of her eye, by looking up and sideways.

After eighteen years, she could hardly remember any other way of seeing the world. On this particular Sabbath, there was a special excitement at the synagogue, where she regularly went to worship. A Galilean preacher and prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, had arrived in town and would be teaching there. She and the others in town had heard reports about this Jesus—how he talked about God’s reign arriving and how he healed sick people. She was not sure how many of the rumours to believe, and she was trying not to get her hopes up. Her life already had too many disappointments to count.

When she entered the synagogue, the place was abuzz. As Jesus began to teach, however, the room was hushed. Moments later, his words turned from teaching to invitation. He had caught her eye—no small feat, given that he had to lean over and incline his head to do so. “Come here,” he beckoned to her. She slowly made her way to the front of the assembly.

What happened next amazed the whole congregation. “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When this man, Jesus, spoke those words and put his hands on her broken, bent body, she felt power surge through her. Without hesitation, she straightened her once crooked back. She stood tall and praised her God . . . (Jeanine K. Brown at workingpreacher.org).

A woman is miraculously healed of an ailment that has crippled her for 18 years and yet the focus of Luke’s Gospel is on the contentious discussion between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue after the healing. Astoundingly, Jesus’ amazing

power is nearly ignored to zero in on, instead, a technicality. Jesus, in the opinion of the synagogue leader, has done work on the sabbath. He has broken one of the 10 commandments. Has he? Let's find out.

The story we hear today follows on the heels of the story of the fig tree that has not been producing fruit. The owner of the vineyard wants to cut it down – it has produced nothing over the past three years. The gardener asks to be given one more year to fertilize the tree and help it along. Give it a chance to produce fruit and, if it doesn't, then you may cut it down, he says.

Jesus is searching. Jesus is making his way to his death in Jerusalem and, on the way, he is searching. He stops in to teach at local synagogues, as he does today, and he is searching...searching for those who are bearing fruit in God's arriving kingdom. Jesus desires to encourage those who are bearing fruit and to spread fertilizer on the ones who are not. The synagogue leader in our story today needs a little fertilizer.

Why is that though? This leader does make a valid point. Jesus, by healing this woman, has just done work on the Sabbath. That is an accurate reading of the Jewish laws. God created the Sabbath as a day of rest – on it you shall do no manner of work. That is the fourth of the 10 commandments.

However, sometimes an accurate reading of Scripture allows us to put blinders on, lets us ignore the needs of those who desperately need the peace and love of God's kingdom. Sometimes an accurate reading, or what we *think* is an accurate reading of Scripture loses sight of the heart of that Scripture, the foundation on which it was written.

When God first gives the 10 commandments to his people, he begins by saying, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Ex.20:2). This phrase, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” is repeated over and over and over again throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. It is the foundation, the motivation, the reason for all that God is doing in the world. He brought his people out of bondage to the greed-driven, status-driven, fear of ‘not enough’ ways of the empire and, in the 10 commandments, laid the groundwork for an alternative community, a different way of living – one of freedom from being tied to the need for property, position, and pocketbook – free to live with compassion, love, forgiveness, and abundant generosity.

The Sabbath is more than a day of rest. Who, in our society is able to rest? to stop work, to stop making an income, stop looking for food, for shelter, for clothing? It was the same then as it is now. Those with money are able to rest. Those with paid vacations are able to stop the constant hunt for an income to provide basic needs. God’s command to rest was the command for everyone to rest – from the slave to the rich land owner; from the homeless to the CEO. Everyone was to rest, to disengage from commerce and competition for an entire day. In order to this, those with money needed to provide for those without. Everyone had to care for everyone else. The day of Sabbath was meant to level the playing field.

Old Testament theologian, Walter Brueggemann, in his book called *Sabbath as Resistance* writes, “In our own contemporary context of the rat race of anxiety, the celebration of Sabbath is an act of both resistance and alternative. It is resistance because it is a visible insistence that our lives are not defined by the

production and consumption of commodity goods. Such an act of resistance,” he says, “requires enormous intentionality and communal reinforcement amid the barrage of seductive pressures from the insatiable insistences of the market, with its intrusion into every part of our life from the family to the national budget...But Sabbath is not only resistance. It is alternative. It is an alternative to the demanding, chattering, pervasive presence of advertising and its great liturgical claim of professional sports that devour all our ‘rest time.’ The alternative on offer is the awareness and practice of the claim that we are situated on the receiving end of the gifts of God” (xiii-xiv).

“I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” God offers a life of freedom from all that creates social classes and oppression, crime and cutthroat competition in the business world, freedom from all that is broken. Laws of the Old Testament are designed to ensure the continuation of this freedom – they teach God’s people how to maintain lives of gratitude and thankfulness to the One who provides for all of their needs. They teach God’s people how to live in love and peace with all others and with creation. The Sabbath is a new social reality that is carried back into days one through six. Those people who keep Sabbath live all seven days differently (Brueggemann, p.43).

Of course, we blew it. We could not maintain an alternative existence free from the lure of power and possessions. We had to have a bigger house than our neighbour. We had to drive a better car, and those without these things were trained to believe that having these things meant success and so they yearned for these things. Long before Jesus of Nazareth was born, the laws that sustained the

alternative in the freedom of God had fallen by the wayside or had been adapted and interpreted to further the interests of the people holding power. This is what Jesus confronts head on today.

The leader of the synagogue says, "There are six days on which work **ought** to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." The leader is focusing on the six days other than the Sabbath but Jesus flips this around to focus on the intent of the one day – the Sabbath day. Jesus says, "And **ought** not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" Jesus very deliberately uses the language of bondage and freedom because this is the heart of God's commands and it is the foundation for living as God's alternative community. He tells us we **ought** to be doing those things appropriate to life in this alternative community, the necessary behaviours that reveal the perfection of God's kingdom on earth.

Jesus points out to the leader of the synagogue and to anyone who may agree with this leader, that they have very conveniently decided that watering their donkey on the Sabbath is not work because watering their donkey suits their needs. Jesus is drawing attention to the thinking that has stunted their growth, has prevented them from bearing fruit as God's people. They were supposed to be caring for all people as equals, caring for others instead of for their own prosperity. But they have chosen to follow the laws in such a way that promotes their prosperity...tithing their mint and dill and cumin while neglecting justice and mercy (Matt.23:23) as Jesus chastises them in Matthew's Gospel.

And here he spreads the fertilizer, turning their attention back to the intent of the laws. Luke does not name the crippled woman in the story but Jesus does. He calls her a “daughter of Abraham.” This phrase does not occur elsewhere in Luke or in the rest of Scripture (cf. Luke 19:9, where Jesus calls Zacchaeus “a son of Abraham”). This name stresses the woman’s membership in the covenant community – a community built on compassion like the compassion Jesus shows to this woman when he heals her, a community founded on the laws of a God who brought them out of bondage into freedom, a community where love of God and love of neighbour take precedence over the snarls and tangles of the world that bind us.

Jesus calls the leader of the synagogue a hypocrite and hypocrite means actor. This leader has been acting the part of a devout worshipper and follower of God. The crowd rejoices with the woman as the acting is exposed and the real crippled person in our story is revealed. Jesus is not a Sabbath-breaker. He is living the Sabbath in the fullness that God intended, forming a community of equals rather than adhering to traditions that exclude others and get in-between us and life with God.

After creating our world, God rests. He “has complete confidence in the fruit-bearing, blessing-generating processes of creation that have been instituted” (Brueggemann, p.29). God commands that we rest to share in that confidence. Jesus tells us that we are to have complete confidence in the provision of God and of God’s creation rather than on our efforts of acquisition – forgetting the Source of all things and turning to the things themselves for our comfort and security. In a book by Anthony de Mello called *One Minute Wisdom* he writes of “Worship”:

“To the disciple who was overly respectful the Master said, ‘Light is reflected on a wall. Why venerate the wall? Be attentive to the light’ (p.33).

We all have walls that we mistake for the light itself – walls that block us from the complete freedom of living the necessary way of life in God’s kingdom. We are all crippled and in need of straightening, stunted and in need of fertilizer. Together, and with God’s help, we can name those walls that block true relationship with God. Together, and with God’s help, we can find the areas of our lives that need fertilizer to bear fruit. Together, and with God’s help, we can allow God to take away what binds us and straighten up, rejoicing in all the wonderful things God is doing.