

Sunday August 28, 2022

Luke 13:10-17
“Shaming the Proud”

Truth doesn't seem to matter these days. People will believe anything, if the facts are blurred or distorted, but sold with urgency and zealotry. I've watched in down right horror, the events transpiring south of the border, as they approach their mid-term elections. Candidates are being lambasted, and out right rejected, for disagreeing with the patently false statement that the 2020 election was rigged and stolen from Donald Trump. Its really getting very hard to hear the truth and to have even a majority accept it as truth.

It used to be that when the truth humiliated you, you were humiliated indeed. Worse; when a truth so obvious that it can be stated in a sentence or two humiliates you, then your shame is all that more profound. It is one thing if a philosopher builds an elaborate argument to disprove some point you had made, but it's another thing completely, if a simple and swift observation of the facts does you in. Sometimes it is the proverbial “getting hoisted with your own petard”, that is, trapped by your own words.

It reminds me of a moment in an episode of the TV show *M*A*S*H*, in which the perpetually squirrely, but somewhat dim-witted Major Burns claims (falsely) that he was not the person who had been anonymously squealing on his comrades. Through a series of verbal give-and-takes, suddenly Burns gets backed into a corner, prompting Col. Potter to ask, “So why'd you, do it?” “I thought it was my patriotic duty.” “I thought you said you didn't do it,” Col. Potter rejoins. “I thought I did, too . . .” is Burns' sheepish final comment. Busted!

In Luke 13, Jesus is said to have humiliated his opponents. Gave them their comeuppance. I don't think humiliation was Jesus' main goal here, however, so much as his thinking is out-loud disbelief over the fact that some people can be so incredibly obtuse and, in their obtuseness, be also so downright cruel. One of the themes in the gospels, is that Jesus routinely did things on the Sabbath that got the religious authorities hopping mad at him.

Brief reminder that Sabbath here is Saturday, the Jewish holy day. And in every case, Jesus took the opportunity to remind the mostly religious elite that despite their pious intentions, they had rather significantly misunderstood the very purpose behind the Sabbath. Just to recap. The Sabbath was originally meant to be a day of delight, rest, enjoyment. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Ten Commandments are given twice, with virtually no difference between the words in Exodus 20 and the words in Deuteronomy 5.

Only the commandment on the Sabbath day shows a significant variation. Whereas Exodus 20 grounds Sabbath observance in creation (“ . . . for in six days the Lord God created the heavens and the earth . . .”) in Deuteronomy 5 it is grounded in redemption (“ . . . remember that you were slaves in Egypt but that the Lord your God led you out of that land . . .”). So, it seems that Sabbath has something to do with both creation and redemption.

On the creation side is that fact that after six days of creating, according to the Genesis 1 account, the Lord God rested on the seventh day, not because he was exhausted, and in need of an afternoon nap.

Sunday August 28, 2022

No, what God did on the seventh day, was the same thing Adam and Eve were to do on what constituted their first full day of existence: meaning they were to revel in, and delight over the creation.

On the redemption side, the Sabbath day is a reminder that God has liberated us from all that is evil and injurious to human flourishing. We take joy in remembering that God is redeeming the creation, salvaging all that evil has sullied, so as to return it the glory God intended in the beginning. All of Jesus' healing miracles address the need to redeem the fractured creation around us.

The fourth commandment lists just one Sabbath caveat: no work. But over time the devout in Israel took that one injunction and ran with it. Later on, we protestants undertook the same endeavor. Making a list of all the prohibitions for our Sunday observance.

In Judaism, somewhere around 613 other rules and regulations, were heaped on top of the fourth commandment. All in an effort to carefully define work, and to help people avoid even a hint of performing work on the Sabbath. What was supposed to be a day of joy in both creation and redemption, became a frightening day in which people worried the whole day long they might screw up, and perform a deed of work after all.

Or even more frightening were the self appointed "religious police" who were always looking for violations of one of these 613 rules. In many ways it was far easier to just sit in a corner and wait the Sabbath out.

Some examples of the ample laws about the Sabbath were, and still are for our Jewish friends; a Sabbath's "burden" is defined as the weight of "a dried fig." A fig! It gets even more complicated than that. If a person were to twice lift the weight of half a dried fig, so as to transport it from one place to another, and thus combining the action into one, that would also constitute a sin and a Sabbath desecration.

How about; a person could not throw up an object, and catch it, for that would be work, involving your hand in such labor. But a big question arose as to whether a person could throw up the weight with one hand and catch it with the other. Similarly, a person could carry rain water caught from the sky, but not drained off the roof. Similarly; if a person were in one place, and his hand filled with fruit stretched into another, and the Sabbath overtook him in this position, he would have to drop the fruit, since if he withdrew his full hand from one locality into another, he would be carrying a burden on the Sabbath.

It was not lawful to sell anything to a heathen, a non-Jewish person, unless the object would reach its destination before the Sabbath, nor to give to a heathen workman anything to do which might involve him in the Sabbath work. Thus, Rabbi Gamaliel (The apostle Paul's famous teacher) was careful to send his linen to be washed three days before the Sabbath, lest it not get done in time.

You could not increase heat on the Sabbath; thus, nothing could be cooked. An egg could not be boiled by putting it near a hot kettle, nor in a cloth, nor in sand heated by the sun.

Cold water could be poured on warm water, but not the reverse. One rabbi went so far as to forbid throwing warm water on your body, lest you either spread a vapor, or clean the floor thereby. And this is just a few of hundreds of such rules.

In today's passage, a major rule is being challenged by Jesus. According to the law, healing was only permitted on the Sabbath if someone's life was severely threatened. Otherwise, a person would have to wait until the Sabbath passed. A chronic illness was not considered urgent. Thus, Jesus is criticized for healing people on the Sabbath with chronic health concerns. A man with a withered hand, or a man with dropsy, or like today a woman bent over for 18 years.

Letting the woman suffer until the Sabbath was over was, according to the "rules" was the right choice because she had had this condition for 18 years. Among other things, Jesus made a point in his ministry to say, Sabbath or not; "No, no, no" to refusing healing of any kind. As the Lord of creation, and the Savior aiming to redeem that creation, he was in the perfect position to tell us what the Sabbath was supposed to have been all along. But mostly he just illustrated the point through his own deeds, in this case healing someone.

This healing was an act of redemption, liberating this woman from all that had ailed her, and it therefore tied in with the integrity of the original creation, too, in that it restored her to the kind of health and vitality God desires for all his creatures. **Creation. Redemption.** Jesus had both Sabbath themes up and running at the same time (and also, both constitute the two major themes of the entire Bible!). However, things had fallen far from any kind of a Sabbath vision such as the one Jesus possessed and demonstrated.

It had gotten so bad, that an ox or donkey had a better shot at being treated well on the Sabbath than did a human being. Since no one wanted to see an expensive piece of livestock die of dehydration on a Sabbath, someone had long ago put in a proviso to the Sabbath day regulations that untying an animal for the purpose of getting it to a watering trough, was not an act of work. But since no one had thought to add a proviso or a caveat about helping a human being on the Sabbath, what Jesus did that day for this hapless woman, did not meet with approval of experts.

Without even realizing it, the authorities had granted a higher status to a donkey, than to the average human being! This was a truth hidden in plain sight, but sometimes it takes a fresh set of eyes to spy that obvious truth. Enter the eyes of Jesus.

It is a sad thing when religion—however piously intended—becomes a tool to prop up the views of a few, no matter who gets hurt by such efforts. The Sabbath day was, all along, intended to be a day of joy and creation revelry. When such a basic fact gets forgotten—and then when this gets pointed out—those of us who get caught up in it all, cannot help but feel humiliated. But **that** is not part of what God desires for us on the Sabbath, either!

This healing story is unique to Luke, in which Jesus is reported to heal a woman who has suffered for eighteen years from severe forward flexion of her spine. In other words, she is bent over walking with her head at waist level. Imagine her existence. How difficult simply looking after herself, would be. Going everywhere looking at the world from a side peripheral view. She was an outcast in some ways, but she was still a devout woman.

Sunday August 28, 2022

She came to the synagogue; maybe prompted by Jesus being there, but she takes her place with the other women at the back. Only men sat up front. She came expecting nothing, but to worship in peace. To celebrate the Sabbath as best as she could, and hear what Jesus, the prophet from Galilee had to say. Now I should point out to you, that some medical experts have a theory about her condition. As she is described, it is possible she suffered from an orthopedic condition, such as ankylosing spondylitis.

If this is true, it is a condition that fuses vertebrae together, and ribs become inflexible. It is a condition that strikes teens and young adults, so this woman could easily have had it for 18 years. The challenges to anyone suffering from this debilitating condition would include: neck and back pain, fatigue, difficulty breathing, heart problems related to inflammation of the aorta, and, potentially, feelings of frustration, vulnerability, or isolation.

Such an explanation sounds reasonable, but hold on a minute. There is a surprise in her diagnosis. Luke, who himself is a doctor, reveals to us that what ailed this crippled woman, was not your run-of-the-mill spinal disorder. This was no slipped disc, or arthritic growth along the spinal canal, or even ankylosing spondylitis.

This condition was caused by an evil spirit sent by Satan himself. We could dismiss this assumption as a quaint superstition, but it was Jesus who declared the hand of Satan at work in this woman's suffering. True, even if her condition been the result of a fall from a ladder two decades earlier, it still would have been fitting for Jesus to heal her, Sabbath day or not. But the whole point of this story, being recorded by Luke, is that it happens on the Sabbath.

Jesus is seeking to recapture for all of us the original reason for the Sabbath. A day to celebrate the "goodness" of creation, and God's redemptive work. This woman's situation revealed that all is not well with God's original intention for creation.

But that her situation was attributable to the forces of evil, makes Jesus' exorcism of the demon and the consequent healing of her physical frame, all the more praiseworthy and all the more fitting a deed for a Sabbath day. The last line of this text says that although the authorities walked away muttering into their beards over their slam-dunk humiliation, the people "were delighted." Jesus demonstrated what everyone wanted in their Sabbath celebrations.

So, what then do we take away from this healing story, and our thoughts about the Sabbath. How do we look at the Sabbath whether we mark it as Saturday or Sunday or any other day. Many clergy, who take Monday's off, see those Mondays as their Sabbaths. How can we take a healthy view of our Sabbaths. I came across a story that may just give us a clue. It goes like this.

One man challenged another to an all-day wood chopping contest. The challenger worked very hard, stopping only for a brief lunch break. The other man had a leisurely lunch and took several breaks during the day. At the end of the day, the challenger was surprised, and annoyed to find that the other fellow had chopped substantially more wood than he had. "I don't get it," he said. "Every time I checked, you were taking a rest, yet you chopped more wood than I did."

Sunday August 28, 2022

"But you didn't notice," said the winning woodsman, "that I was sharpening my ax when I sat down to rest."

Could it be that the Sabbath is not about following rules, but rather about sharpening our axes. Meaning a time of refocusing, and reflecting on the two themes of Sabbath; creation and redemption. A lack of a Sabbath day, however it looks for you, leaves our hearts dull. In Jesus' day people dreaded Sabbaths. It meant a great deal of preparatory work to do nothing on the Sabbath.

Our own history as protestants has a long lineage of onerous rules and expectations, that lead people away from the celebration and joy, our reflection of God's creation and redemption should bring to us all. Mark Driscoll wrote "On the Sabbath day, we are remembering that my relationship with God did not begin with what I've done, it is not sustained by what I do, and it is not guaranteed to the end by my effort or work. I'm saved from beginning to end by Jesus' work."

Ahh, now *that* is what the Sabbath should be all about: don't you agree?