

“Sabbath in a 24/7 World”

Isaiah 58:9b-14; Luke 13:10-17

Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the **sabbath**. ¹¹And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴**But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.”** ¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the **sabbath** untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶And 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?” ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. (NRSV)

Reflecting on the meaning of **Sabbath observance**, Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal Priest, popular writer, and Professor of Religion at Piedmont College, said:

*“When I was a parish minister there was **no hope** of remembering the sabbath, at least not in the Hebrew sense of **resting** from my labors. If I wanted a sabbath, I had to make it a moveable feast. Often it was a Friday, or a Monday, when I turned off the ringers on all my telephones and spent the day in solitary pursuits. It remained a work day, however. I did laundry. I wrote sermons. I balanced the checkbook. As much as I craved a true sabbath, I did not believe I could afford one. There was so much work to be done. If I did none for one day, then there would be twice as much the next day. I worked guiltily on my days off, like an alcoholic sneaking a drink.*

*When I left parish ministry, Sundays were free and clear. There was no reason in the world why I could not observe sabbath--**except** for that compulsion of mine*

to **produce, perform, accomplish**. I continued to work seven days a week until this past Lent, when I decided to obey the fourth commandment. One day a week, I would lie back in God's arms. One day a week, whether or not my work were done, I would live as if I were free.¹

We (of course) are not currently in the season of Lent, (it's a good seven months away!) but I am wondering this morning, if you ever **feel the same** about observing the Sabbath as Barbara Brown Taylor?

Sabbath (you'll recall) is a commandment from God. But what makes this commandment in particular important? What makes it relevant?

Barbara Brown Taylor describes it in this way: *"The first holy thing in all creation, Abraham Heschel says, was not a people or a place **but a day**. God made everything in creation and called it good, but when God rested on the seventh day, God called it holy. That makes the seventh day a **"palace in time,"** Heschel says, **into which human beings are invited every single week of our lives.**"*²

Let's think about these things in terms of our scripture readings this morning.

You see, Jesus and his initial followers, like their fellow Jews, lived within a tradition of *Sabbath joy*. Jews, whether followers of Jesus or not, would have known Isaiah's summary of righteous worship: *"If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable ... **then** you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken"* (Isaiah 58:13-14).

Jews, in fact, were the ones who originally told *the gospel story*, and they insisted on retaining the Sabbath. Eventually, the followers of Jesus shifted from celebrating *the last day of the week* to celebrating *the first day of the week*, **Sunday**, the day the church proclaims that Jesus rose from the dead.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Letting God Run Things Without My Help," The Christian Century, May 5, 1999

² Barbara Brown Taylor, article, "Why God Wants you to Rest"

The meaning of the Sabbath thus *shifted* from a focus on *the creation of the world and liberation from slavery* to a focus on what Christians would see as *a new creation and a new liberation*: Jesus's resurrection, his creating a new people, and his conquering death.³

It's also important to understand that *Sabbath observance*, in the first century and for the past two millennia *has been a hotly debated issue*. For example, no Jew, then or now, would have upheld any Sabbath ruling *preventing work were a life in danger*.

But there are issues that were and can be discussed. Should one practice medicine and so "work" in order to heal a nonpainful, chronic condition such as the one in Luke's story? More, what constitutes "work"?

Thus, one common interpretation goes, the church celebrates Jesus's *breaking open* a legalized, ossified tradition; that he both shamed and frustrated "*the Jews*" who opposed him is an added benefit to this particular interpretation.

The problems with this line of reasoning, however, are numerous:

- From a negative and false stereotype of Jewish Sabbath observance
- To a promotion of Christianity *not* through what it positively promotes (such as healing) but through a *negative comparison to Judaism*.

The stereotype is unfortunate because most Jews would have agreed with Jesus that healing takes precedence over the Sabbath. In fact, today's story highlights Jesus's action *as in contradistinction from* what the synagogue leader would have preferred.⁴

But *the crowd*—that is, the Jewish majority—has no problem with Jesus's healing the woman, and they would have recognized his argument *to be a standard form for discussion of legal matters*.

Further, the story *is not arguing* that anyone with any medical skill should be spending the Sabbath checking for chronic conditions that might be cured. *The*

³ Amy Jill Levine, *"The Misunderstood Jew,"* Harper One, 2006, p. 30

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 31

forbidding of work on the Sabbath remains in place—physicians such as Luke, then and now, got a day off—while miracle working remained permitted.

So, Christians today (and Jews as well) may rejoice that Jesus was able to heal the woman and so allow her fully to celebrate the Sabbath, *without having to change their own Sabbath practices*.

The synagogue leader thus represent *not* “the” Jewish view, but rather “a” Jewish view, and one *against* that of the majority of the people in his congregation.⁵

What, then, does the story mean?

The language of *bondage* is the dominant *metaphor*. Notice the language: *Jesus heals a woman crippled for eighteen years, bent over, unable to stand up straight. Jesus says to her, “Woman, you **are set free** from your ailment.”* Freed from her bondage, the woman, “*stood up straight.*”

In a similar way, to a paralytic brought to him lying on a mat, Jesus said, “*Stand up and take your mat and walk* (see Mark 2:9 and John 5:8). In the more familiar words of an earlier translation, “*Rise, take up your bed, and walk!*”

The metaphorical meaning of the two stories is clear: Jesus frees people from being bent over by bondage, so they can *stand up straight again*, from paralysis so *they can walk again*.⁶

Let me ask you: What is *binding you? What do you need to be set free from?*

For most Americans, it is chronic *over work* and unending *busyness* and an inability to *rest*—and we often tend to do “*church*” in this way, too.

It’s not so easy to *relax* and let be. Consider that *labor* may be an escape from reflection, *productivity* a barrier to our inner wisdom, and *unceasing activity* a cacophony that deafens us to that “*still small voice*’.

But, I think, Barbara Brown Taylor, got it right when she said:

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 33

⁶ Marcus J. Borg, “*Jesus*,” Harper Collins, New York, 2006, pp. 202, 203

“At least one day in every seven, pull off the road and park the car in the garage. Close the door to the toolshed and turn off the computer. Stay home, not because you are sick but because you are well. Talk someone you love into being well with you. Take a nap, a walk, and hour for lunch. Test the premise that you are worth more than you can produce – that even if you spent one whole day of being good for nothing you would still be precious in God’s sight. And when you get anxious because you are convinced that this is not so – remember that your own conviction is not required. This is a commandment. Your worth has already been established, even when you are not working. The purpose of the commandment is to woo you to the same truth.”⁷

Barbara Brown Taylor also advises that, *“Most people I know want to talk about why it is impossible for them to practice Sabbath, which is an interesting spiritual exercise in itself. If you want to try it, then make two lists on one piece of paper. On one side of the paper, list all of the things **you know give you life** that you never take time to do. Then, on the other side, make a list of all the reasons why you think it is impossible for you to do those things. That is all there is to it. Just make the two lists and keep the piece of paper where you can see it. Also promise not to shush your heart when it howls for the list it wants.”⁸*

So, friends, there is no *one formula* for practicing or re-introducing Sabbath-keeping into your life. Just take *time* and return to the *“simple life”* once a week or twice a month or build your Sabbath observation into set-aside moments in all your days.

Remember, *it is God’s gift to us—for liberation from that which binds and inhibits fullness of life.*

⁷ <http://sabbathliving.org/sabbath-quotes/>

⁸ Barbara Brown Taylor, excerpt from article, Sabbath Resistance

