

We marked our children going back to school, with the blessing of the backpacks last week, for we know they will face some difficult situations... the danger of exposure to skewed values & questionable influences. We hope they will make good and wise choices, and somehow retain the truths, ideals and lessons we've tried so hard to instill. It can be a most fearful thing for a loving parent to contemplate. When Israel's army was defeated, their nation conquered and the people taken in exile to Babylon, it created a similar, nearly impossible crisis for them. How could they remain faithfully distinct in the city of Babylon, and not get sucked into the moral corruption all around them? How to retain their sense of identity as those who belong to God?

A part of their answer was to live rigidly separate and distinct from the Babylonian ways, their culture, values and debauchery, by following their very strict rules with careful adherence to their traditions and rituals of holiness and purity... increasingly more focused on traditions of religious practice. Before the Temple was destroyed, they had offered sacrifices as a way of expressing their regret and gratitude for God's mercy. It wasn't because the Lord had a need to smell barbeque, but was intended as a tangible expression of repentance and desire to restore their broken relationship with God. The point was to reconcile and foster their walk of faith with God by recognizing their sin and need for God's gracious mercy, and to become a community striving to be faithful to God. But over time, as the prophet Isaiah complains, their focus shifted away from their relationship with God to more of a business transaction or paying off a debt... as in how many animals are necessary to cover the cost of my sin, and to satisfy and placate the judgment of an angry God?

With their focus shifting to primarily the outward and external, it also became a way to separate and exclude outcasts, as if some were more loved and precious to God than others. So the prophet Isaiah calls to the people, warning them that their rote religious rituals deeply offend the Lord,

Isaiah 1:10

Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

Now Sodom and Gomorrah were the two ancient cities, whose sinful depravity so offended the Lord's righteousness, that God sent fire to purge them from the face of the earth... so for a prophet from God to compare you to Sodom or Gomorrah, well, that is never a good sign or something you want to hear. The Lord rejects their treating his love and mercy, as if they were mere commodities to be purchased by burning dead animals...

Isaiah 1:11-12

I have had enough of burnt offerings ... who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; ... incense is an abomination to me. I cannot endure your solemn assemblies...

Their whole superficial religious play-acting missed the point, for they had mistaken the outward sign for the real thing... and so God describes what he really wants,

Isaiah 1:16-17

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

Generally speaking, the religious leaders still didn't get it, but became increasingly rigid in their rules and traditions. In contrast, the life and ministry of Jesus demonstrated the truth about God, his grace, power, wisdom and compassion, as we can see in the Luke 13 passage. The story begins with Jesus at a synagogue on the Sabbath.

Luke 13:11

And 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.

The way that Luke describes this woman's condition, the emphasis is not so much on her disease itself, but on the result, that bent over, she is a captive, in bondage to her ailment. When I tried to imagine and visualize and apply this

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story, the phrase “bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.” can describe far more than just physical illness. We too have experienced the weight of a burden causing us to bend, or feeling so unworthy, ashamed with regret, worried, or guilty that we’re unable to stand up straight, at least on the inside, and to be in desperate need of healing-release and support. After 18 years, mostly nobody noticed or cared about this woman, but Jesus did. Jesus saw her with eyes of mercy and compassion.

Luke 13:12-13

When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. "Woman, you have been released from your weakness"

The verb tense specifically describes an action that has already taken place with continuing effects into the present. Moreover, the expected verb here would be "to heal or cure." Yet, Luke uses a word which means to release, untie or set free... so it's not so much about a healing as it is a release from bondage. This is the good news. Jesus noticed her stooped over at the edge of the synagogue, and without her even asking, by grace, released & set her free... that's what Jesus does, and why the coming of Jesus is good news! “immediately she stood up straight and began praising God” So how does she respond to being touched by Jesus? She worships, standing before God in grateful praise, rejoicing at the wonderful thing God has done for her... which certainly sounds like an appropriate thing for the Sabbath! But there is also more to this than just a simple miracle story. Continuing a little further and deeper,

Luke 13:13-14

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.”

The healing has sparked a controversy. The leader of the synagogue was displeased and upset that Jesus had healed on the Sabbath. The synagogue leader argues from scripture, alluding to

Deuteronomy 5:13

"For six days you shall labor and do all your work."

To me, the scariest and most troubling aspect of this story is that the synagogue leader thought he was doing God's will, and even quoted from Scripture to back up his assertion. The leader of the synagogue envisioned a God whose priority was a faithful obedience of doing religious rituals and careful attention to the exact letter of the law. In contrast, Jesus reframes the meaning of holiness, as God described it through the prophet Isaiah,

Deuteronomy 5:16

“... learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed ...”

, - angrily Jesus rejects the synagogue leader's assertion,

Luke 13:15-16

“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? 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?”

This next piece is a bit technical, but it's also very important. Since the synagogue leader quoted from Deuteronomy 5, Jesus also builds his argument from that same passage. The next verse in Deut. specifies in detail, that on the Sabbath, no one, not slave or free is permitted to do anything except rest. There were, however exceptions, as Jesus notes, that it was apparently a common practice to untie or release a cow or donkey to drink on the Sabbath. His point is that the woman is far more important than an animal, yet animal needs seem to be valued more by this worship leader. She is a "daughter of Abraham," heir to the same promise as Abraham. She has been held captive for----18 long years. What better time for a "daughter of Abraham" to be released and set free than on the Sabbath... because as the next verse in Deuteronomy explains, the very reason for the institution of the Sabbath, was to celebrate their release from slavery,

Deuteronomy 5:15

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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.

Jesus has taken the synagogue leader's argument, and its same scriptural source, and turned it against him. His message is clear: If the Sabbath is about release from bondage, as your own passage from Deuteronomy clearly states, then it's entirely proper to celebrate this woman's release. Yes, on the Sabbath, even especially on the Sabbath. As it turns out there were two people in the synagogue that day who were both in serious bondage, and needing to be released... the first was the woman needing to be freed from her illness. The other is a bit more subtle. The leader of the synagogue was so bound by his rules, that he couldn't rejoice even when a woman was healed. Something absolutely wonderful had just happened, and that cold-joyless religious leader had missed it, entirely. The problem was with his understanding of God. He envisioned a harsh, angry and demanding God, whose good has to be earned by obedience to rules & rituals. In contrast, consider the God Jesus knew and came to proclaim, - a father who rushes out to embrace his prodigal son; - a shepherd who searches and carries the lost sheep home. - a religious teacher who welcomed and ate with sinners & outcasts. And because the Sabbath celebrates our God's grace & compassion, it's not about a joyless religion of endless rules of ritual.

One time, after her husband's funeral, a widow wanted me to know why she didn't expect to be back in church for a while... which was because she would miss her husband sitting with her, hearing his voice and the way that he held the hymnal for her... and so, she was afraid that just being in the sanctuary, she might cry, and she didn't want her tears to disturb or disrupt our Sunday church service. Another time while I was meeting with some parents about baptizing their children, they told me how nervous and concerned they were, that their newborn might fuss or cry during worship, or that their little ones might become restless. I cannot imagine anything more tragic, or anything that so totally misses the whole the point than if among the family of God, of all places and all people, that the tears and hurt of a grieving widow are not permitted, or that there is no allowance for a restless little child or that the sounds of an infant are somehow out of place... what a mistake against the compassion and ministry of Jesus, to be so rigid and bound by a cold sterile sense of formality, that it could interfere with the gracious and loving welcome of God... because the ministry, the mission, and the practice of Jesus was to bring people into the light of God's love and mercy... and that is precisely the issue that is in play in the passage that we read earlier from the gospel of Luke. This story, this event from the life and ministry of Jesus Christ raises the critical question and calls us to consider, just what sort of a place and people are we going to be when we gather to honor and worship the Lord our God? Is this a place where a person can cry without embarrassment? Can we smile? Can we hug? Can we laugh? Can we show compassion? Can we tell the truth here, can we admit that we fail and fall? Do we always have to seem nice, all wearing our happy church-face, as if everything in our lives were always OK, perfect and fine? If we are hurting, or if we've made a huge mistake or spoken badly, or if we are feeling lost, disappointed or confused or regret ... is that OK, and can we let someone else know?... can this be a place of hope, healing & release? God have mercy, and may God soften our cold - hardened hearts, if we are NOT a people who welcome the infirm and struggling, if this is NOT the place where we can talk and share our true hurts, our struggles, our sufferings and express our deepest needs with one another. My friends, what kind of church are we going to be? Hopefully one of welcome, kindness, gentleness and compassion, where we can step out from behind our 'church-faces' among a family who will love, accept and support us no matter how much we hurt or messed-up we are, or how desperately we need forbearance, hope, healing and release... a place where widows can openly cry and be supported, where even restless children and fussy babies are loved where, imperfect though we are, here we belong, for here all are loved, welcomed and needed, and here we can love and forgive one another.

What is the Sabbath all about?

Psalm 118:24, 29

This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.