

Psalm 118:1, 4-6, 14, 26-29 (New Revised Standard Version)

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! Let those who fear the Lord say, "His steadfast love endures forever." Out of my distress I called on the Lord; the Lord answered me and set me in a broad place. With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me? The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. We bless you from the house of the Lord. The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar. You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you. O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Luke 13:10-17 (New Revised Standard Version)

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 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. 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. 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." But 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? 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?" When 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.

A pastor was patiently waiting to see an emergency room doctor,
when a woman rushed in carrying her little girl, 3 or 4 years old,
holding a bloody handkerchief over her terrified child's mouth.
Looking around frantically for some help, she rushed toward the desk,
"My daughter's been hurt and needs help ..."

And the mother was cut-off midsentence by the clerk at the desk,
"You need to take a seat and one of the clerks will check you in."
"But my little girl was hit in the mouth by a ..."

Interrupted again, this time more forcibly,
"Please take a seat ma'am. Someone will be with you shortly."

Just then, an ER doctor happened to walk in, and taking in the scene,
he said to the clerk behind the desk,

"Shame on you! This little girl needs help right now."

Then he motioned to the woman, and led them into an examination room.

Shame on you! – the physician was focused on a child in pain.

The clerk at the desk was focused on hospital procedure.

I am reminded of what Robert Heinlein wrote in one of his books,

"Don't let rules keep you from doing the right thing."

Our Luke text begins with Jesus at a synagogue on the Sabbath. vs. 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 Luke describes this woman's condition, the emphasis is not so much on her disease itself, but on what it's doing to her, that bent over, she is held captive in bondage to her ailment...

... feeling a desperate need for healing, compassion and support,
wishing and hoping that someone, anyone will notice and care.

After 18 years, mostly nobody noticed or cared about this woman,
but Jesus did. Jesus saw her with eyes of mercy and compassion.

Marginalized in the shadows, Jesus shines his light. vs. 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.

You are set free from your ailment.

The word Luke chooses specifically means to release, untie or set free

- **so this healing is described as a release from bondage.**

And that is the Good News.

Jesus noticed her stooped over, off to the side in 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!

It's a simple healing story – Jesus sees the woman, he touches her

and he sets her free from the bondage of being bent out of shape.

She responds, "immediately she stood up straight and began praising God"

She worships. She standing before God in grateful praise,
rejoicing at the wonderful thing God has done for her...

... and that certainly sounds most appropriate for the Sabbath! ...

... exactly as we heard from Psalm 118:29

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.

But there is something more to this than just a simple miracle story.

Continuing a little further, there is also some conflict, vs. 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.

Jesus let mercy and compassion take precedence over the law
and to set free this woman's suffering **was his priority.**

He wouldn't let rules keep him from doing the compassionate thing.

The synagogue leader argues from scripture, quoting from Deut. 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 was even quoting Scripture to back up his assertion.

The leader of the synagogue envisioned a God whose priority
was strict and rigid obedience to doing religious rituals
and careful attention to the exact letter of the law.

Jesus's using this situation to teach something important about God.

That religious leader was missing the point,
and needed to read that same passage a bit further.

The stated reason for commanding no work on the Sabbath,
was to celebrate their release from Egyptian bondage, vs. 15

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.**

While forced to live their bitter slave-life under Pharaoh,
they had to work hard and be productive every day of their lives.

Sabbath was a reminder that God released them from that slavery,
as sign that God loves us and has created this world good
with abundance enough that we are given a day of rest.

Sabbath was given as a blessing from God for our benefit,

but religious authorities had turned it into human rules,
a legalistic bondage rather than a Sabbath celebration...

... which as Jesus pointed out,
even the synagogue leader did not really follow and obey.

As Jesus explains rejecting the leader's assertion, vs. 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?**"

There were, acceptable exceptions to the Sabbath rest command,
as Jesus notes, that of course it was reasonable practice
to untie or release an ox or donkey to drink on the Sabbath.

Their hypocrisy was shameful, cold, harsh & obvious – **to object that**

Jesus healed, releasing this woman from suffering on the Sabbath,
and yet had no issue with caring for their animals on the Sabbath.

His point is that this woman is far more important than an animal,
yet animal needs seem to be valued more by this worship leader.
Obviously, there was something very wrong with that perspective.

She is a "daughter of Abraham," heir to the same promises as Abraham.
She has been held captive for----18 long years... far too long.

So what better time for a "daughter of Abraham"
to be released and set free than on the Sabbath,
the day that celebrates release from bondage.

His message is clear: If the Sabbath is about release from bondage,

as the passage that you quoted from Deuteronomy clearly states,
then it's entirely proper to celebrate this woman's release.

Yes, on the Sabbath, and even especially on the Sabbath.

The commandment is simple, remember the Sabbath and keep it holy.

That's it.

**Their conflict was not about whether to keep the Sabbath holy,
but their disagreement was how to keep the Sabbath holy.**

To the religious authorities,

Sabbath holiness meant obeying human rules and traditions,
but Jesus defined Sabbath holiness as care and compassion,
as a reflection of God's gracious love and compassion.

Truth is, Jesus could have waited until sundown to heal her.

Compared to eighteen years, what's just a few hours more...

... a minor delay until sundown

would have easily avoided the conflict & controversy.

But Jesus was up to something and pushed this conflict for a reason.

As it turns out there were at least 2 people in the synagogue that day
who were both held in serious bondage and needing to be released...
...the first was the woman needing to be freed from her illness.

The other is less obvious.

The leader of the synagogue was so bound by his rules,
that he couldn't rejoice even when this woman was healed.

Something absolutely wonderful had just happened,

and that cold-joyless religious leader had missed it

instead of joining the joy of the woman and crowd in praising God.

So why was the leader of the synagogue angry and indignant,

instead of joining the woman and crowd in praising God?

The problem was with his understanding of God and God's purpose.

He envisioned a harsh, angry and demanding God,
whose good has to be earned by obedience to rules and ritual.

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.
- reflected by Jesus who welcomed and ate with sinners & outcasts.

And because the Sabbath celebrates our God's grace and compassion,
it's not about a joyless religion of endless rules of ritual.

So how did that synagogue leader so totally miss the point?

Back when Israel's army was defeated by Nebuchadnezzar's army,
the nation conquered and the people taken in exile to Babylon,
it created a significant, 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 all their traditions and rituals of holiness and purity...
... increasingly they focused on traditions of religious practice.

Before the Temple was destroyed, they sacrificed burnt offerings
as a way of expressing their regret and gratitude for God's mercy.
It wasn't because the Lord had a need or desire 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 the Lord's gracious mercy,
and to become a community striving to be faithful to God.

But their focus shifted away from their relationship with God
toward being more of a business transaction or paying off a debt,
to satisfy and placate the harsh judgment of an angry God,
and became increasingly rigid in their rules & traditions.

In contrast, the life, example and ministry of Jesus demonstrated
the truth about God, his grace, power, wisdom and compassion.

**Because we belong to God by love and by grace,
our call is to reflect that love and grace we have received...**

... and if **all** of our neighbors do not matter to us,
then our Christian faith is missing the point.

The holiness God seeks is more than obedience to rules,
because love, mercy, peace, joy and grace also matter,
compassion and human needs must be factored in...

**... which means that our decisions and application of the rules
must always be guided and tempered by love and compassion...**

... as the Apostle Paul describes it 1 Cor. 13:1~3

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I give away all my possessions, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Paul message was, everybody matters, everybody's life matters,
everyone is important, because if God made them then God loves them,

so don't miss out on the joy & gracious purpose God intends...

... which is a growing consciousness of God's grace and presence
at work in our lives and active in the world around us,

as we turn aside from that which is not of the Lord,

that which is not of love.

One of my Sunday School teachers decided that squirmy little boys
might pay attention and listen to his lessons better
if he could find a way to keep our active hands occupied.

Since his hobby was carving things out of wood, mostly birds,
during his Bible lesson he gave us each
a cut-out of a small duck for us to whittle.

And his instructions were simple:

**“Just sit there, be quiet and listen, and gradually
carve away everything that doesn't look like a duck.”**

This is also excellent advice for a life of growing discipleship...

... learn to be quiet and listen, to reflect on our lives,
on the things we say and do, our feelings and attitudes,
and much like whittling a duck out of a block of wood,

-- gradually cut away everything that doesn't look like love.

As Paul writes 1 Corinthians 12:1, 31, 13:13

Brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed... strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and **the greatest of these is love.**