

Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.

We are nearly half-way through Ordinary Time – this long season after Pentecost that spans nearly half the year. It is a season of growth and study when we walk chronologically through one of the synoptic Gospels depending on which year of the lectionary cycle we are in – and this year being C, we are in Luke (Matthew A, Mark B, Luke C).

One of the key themes running throughout Luke is that the Gospel is open to everyone, including Gentiles. Paradoxically, another of Luke's key themes is that Jesus is and remains very much a Jew throughout his ministry – and that the Gospel, so far from superseding Judaism, is fully consistent with it.¹

This week's passage shows us a miraculous healing and Jesus arguing with other Jewish leaders about the essence of sabbath keeping.

I've preached before on the life altering healing of the woman who's back was bent: how her vision, limited to only that she could see looking down was expanded up and out when Jesus healed her, and how Jesus offers us that same healing –

¹ *Salt Project* Lectionary Commentary: <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/8/19/unbound-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-eleventh-week-after-pentecost>

taking away the narrowness of vision we accumulate in life and widening our perspective to look beyond our own experience and to the experiences of our sisters and brothers and all of creation. So, today I want to focus on the practice of sabbath keeping.

The issue of keeping sabbath is one that comes up several times in Luke, from when he healed the man with the withered hand in Luke 6, to today's story, to healing a man with dropsy in Luke 14 – Jesus has the same argument over and over: what is the true meaning of the sabbath?

In order to put that in perspective, it's important to understand the roots of sabbath in the Jewish tradition of Jesus' day.

There are two primary accounts in the Old Testament of the commandment to observe the sabbath day.² One is in Exodus, framing the practice as an imitation of God, who rests on the seventh day of creation as if to delight in the sheer goodness of all that God has made.³

The other is in Deuteronomy, framing the practice as a form of remember the exodus from slavery in Egypt.⁴ Like a “little exodus” each week, keeping the sabbath releases you from toil, reminding you of the divine deliverance at the heart of life and providing a foretaste of the Promised Land.

In short, both of those understandings show that sabbath keeping is for restoration, for experiencing and cultivating the deep, abiding goodness of God and the world God has made.

But there's even more, for within the Jewish tradition there is a “seven times seven” calendrical rhythm of love and restoration.

² Ibid footnote 1 (examples drawn from)

³ Exodus 28:8-11

⁴⁴ Deuteronomy 5:12-15

Keeping sabbath, then, has a “every seventh” rhythm. Every seventh day is a sabbath day; every seventh year is a sabbath year, and every seventh sabbath year (plus one) is a Jubilee year of restoration, a kind of sabbath writ large: the land rests, slaves are freed, debts are forgiven.⁵ When we read in the Gospels that Jesus proclaims “the year of the Lord’s favor,” we see him invoking the Jubilee tradition.

But pulling it back to its root, weekly sabbath keeping is done, in short, for the sake of health: personal health, familial health, societal health, and the health of all creation. Recalling that the root of the word “salvation” is the Latin *salvus* (meaning health), you might say that the rhythm of sabbath is the rhythm of salvation.⁶

And this is why Jesus argues about its true meaning so often. This is important not just for the people of his own day, but for us as well – because he reminds us of the promise and peril of religious practices.

The stories of sabbath keeping in Luke are about how the most “holy” of duties can be carried out in ways that distort and subvert what God intends. Therefore, we must continually ask, “Are we practicing our faith in the proper spirit?”⁷

And what is the proper spirit?

It is this: are we oriented in all we do – our worship and our service, our prayers and our proclamations – toward the vibrant health of the beloved community?⁸ Or, to paraphrase our Presiding Bishop, is it about love? If it’s not, then it’s not about God.

⁵ Leviticus 25:8-12, Exodus 21:2, Exodus 23:10-11, Deuteronomy 15

⁶ Ibid footnote 1.

⁷ Ibid footnote 1.

⁸ Ibid footnote 1.

It's important to remember that religious practices are not ends in themselves, or standards people must meet in order to be righteous.

What Jesus taught all those centuries ago, and what is still essential for us, is that practices like sabbath keeping are meant to help foster healthy lives. Any religious act that diminishes or inhibits life isn't just a missed opportunity, it's a profound contradiction – it is sinful.

Jesus' repeated acts of healing on the sabbath throughout the Gospel of Luke were meant to provoke a clarifying confrontation about what sabbath keeping was really all about in his day.⁹ And, it helps point us toward a vision for what sabbath looks like in our time.

Sabbath – time for rest and restoration, for delight in creation and remembrance of how God has been present in our lives – is healing. It is the thing that unbinds us as surely as it unbound the woman whose back had been bent.

And in our world of 24-hour news cycles, constant email, social media, and text alerts, and the growing expectation that we should always be available – this badge of busyness we wear, sabbath is counter-cultural – which means it's more important now than ever.

The practice of keeping sabbath is a gift that religious people can offer to the wider world – a balm of health in a culture that too often peddles things that look shiny and helpful, but too often only serve to deplete us.

But before we can bring this goodness to the world, we have to practice it ourselves. There's an old cartoon, with a pastor saying he never takes a day off because Satan doesn't either – to which the response is perhaps he should reconsider who his role model is (after all God rested on the seventh day).

⁹ Ibid footnote 1.

It's why I try, as best as possible, to set a firm boundary around my sabbath day on Fridays – not answering emails or texts unless there is a true pastoral emergency.

And it's why we gather week in and week out here, to provide a place to come and sit for the better part of an hour, to breathe deeply and re-center ourselves to God, and to anchor us in a rhythm of practice of keeping sabbath.

My challenge to you this week is to take an honest look at what sabbath looks like in your life, and in the life of your family. What gives life and health? What diminishes it? And what is one thing (big or small) that you can do to build up your practice of sabbath?

May we, like the woman bent over and who's life had grown small, be healed through the practice of sabbath: let us be unbound to live fully into the love of God, our neighbor, and all creation.

~ Amen ~