

Text - Luke 13:10-17

Luke tells us: Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, as he often does, teaching the people about God's kingdom, God's reign, which is active, surprising, and present; teaching the people to see it, to look for it, to be ready for it. It is then that he sees her in the crowd, more than likely toward the back of the room. He notices her back, so curved she is turning her into her own body. He sees her struggle to walk, to stand, to hold her head up.

To hear him call out to her takes her by surprise. She is unsure if he is actually speaking to her, but the people with her urge her forward. Slowly shuffling over to where he stands, uncertain and hopeful, she strains to turn her face toward his. He speaks healing words to her bent body. She feels his hands on her back, touching her softly, and her spine unfolds, straightens. Standing upright for the first time in eighteen long years, she is able to look at him, his face and his eyes, so deep and gentle, brimming with compassion. Laughter spills from her mouth and tears drop from her eyes. Her hands and her voice rise above the crowd in praise for what God has done.

Luke tells us: quickly the awe and joy present in the room turns to conflict. Jesus has healed this woman on the sabbath. The leader of the synagogue is not pleased that Jesus has broken the law, the commandment, of remembering and guarding the sabbath. The leader tells those who are present that they should come for healing the next day, not on the sabbath, citing scripture that there are six days on which to work. It is, of course, a perfectly sound rule, a good rule meant for our own good and the good of others, to remember and guard the sabbath because each one of us is called to rest, as God rested. And yet, Jesus has broken the law by healing once again on the holy day. Why could he not wait? Just one more day. After all, this woman wasn't in any mortal danger. She too could have waited, could she not?

In the book of Exodus it is written of the law: "Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the

seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work - you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.” The instruction, the commandment, is there so that the people, made in the image of God, will emulate God and follow God’s pattern and rhythm in creation, which includes the important rule of rest. To rest and experience the joy of God’s good creation. To rest and marvel in its beauty. To rest as a reminder that as creatures, we belong to the Creator.

There is another scriptural context of this same commandment which is found in the book of Deuteronomy: “Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God.” Added to those familiar words is now a call to remembrance. “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.”

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg writes in *LifeIsASacredText* that in each of those scriptural passages the context for the people of God is different. She writes that in Exodus, “the reason for Shabbat is the creation story: God made the world in six days and rested on the seventh day. So too must we rest on the seventh day...In Deuteronomy the rationale is the Exodus: God freed us from enslavement, and thus commanded us to rest on Shabbat.” Two emphasis of the law for different contexts - the first to emulate God’s patterns and rhythms of creation, the other a reminder to a freed people to keep the day holy because of God’s mighty act of liberation.

Perhaps Jesus’ healing of the woman and his response to the leader of the synagogue that day seems to fall within that second context, that of Deuteronomy, in remembering and guarding the sabbath, that is, freedom from captivity.

This woman who Jesus says has been bound, held, by Satan for far too long, is now set free by him. She experiences it and feels it. The crowd sees it, and witnesses it. Only those who are charged in enforcing the law, ensuring that the people hold to the commandment, do not see that Jesus is at work against Satan, against all the forces that defy God. In this woman's release, in her restoration, those who are in Jesus' presence in the synagogue that day are reminded of their own liberation by God; that they have been set free to live into God's divine patterns and rhythms, made for wholeness, made for dignity and worth.

With his compassion, Jesus calls this woman a daughter of Abraham, that is, a child of the promise of the covenant, "an honorific that underlines her intrinsic worth."¹ With his healing, Jesus' honours "...the beauty, dignity, and integrity of what God had made."² "If the Sabbath is about wholeness and about being the people God created us to be, equal and loved, thriving and flourishing, could there be anything more right than for him to heal on that holy day?"³

Jesus in Luke's telling today is not merely accusing the leader of the synagogue of being a legalist. Something we are all prone toward being, especially when the rules suit us best. Rather, Jesus is confronting a kind of scriptural interpretation which prevents people from discerning the present saving activity of God, the mighty acts of God, this kingdom of God come to earth, which we see and are witness to most clearly through compassion and liberation, through healing and wholeness.

The healing of this woman, this daughter of Abraham, is meant for us to remember our own healing, meant for us to guard the liberating patterns and rhythms for our own lives - a freeing of what bends our backs so low that we cannot stand up straight, a loosening of whatever robs us of dignity and worth, an unbinding of all that fragments our lives away from the

¹ *Wholehearted Faith*, Rachel Held Evans with Jeff Chu, HarperOne, New York, 2021, p. 173

² *Ibid*, p. 172

³ *Ibid*, p. 173

compassion of God who calls out to us and names us daughter, son, child, Beloved.

I leave the last few words this morning from Frederick Buechner, theologian and author, who died this week, on August 15th at the age of 96. In his book, *Longing for Home*, he wrote:

Instead of being whole, most of the time we are in pieces, and we see the world in pieces, full of darkness at one moment and full of light the next. It is in Jesus, of course, and in the people whose lives have been deeply touched by Jesus, and in ourselves at those moments when we also are deeply touched by him, that we see another way of being human in this world, which is the way of wholeness. When we glimpse that wholeness in others, we recognize it immediately for what it is, and the reason we recognize it, I believe, is that no matter how much the world shatters us to pieces, we carry inside us a vision of wholeness that we sense is our true home and that beckons to us.

God's sabbath vision of wholeness, the rhythms and patterns of God's active, surprising, and very present kingdom found in Jesus, in his compassion and his healing, is always the place, and is always the time, when things begin to be made right, repaired, and restored.

Amen.