

Pursuing God-interest (Luke 13:10-17)

Faith United Church of Christ

August 25, 2019.

The gospel passage you heard today retells an event in Jesus' ministry that is found only in the gospel of Luke. This event has four movements. Jesus healed a crippled woman publicly on Sabbath while teaching in the synagogue. In response, the leadership of the synagogue emphasized to the watching crowd that the timing of Jesus' action was wrong. Jesus rebuked the leadership for their practice and attitude regarding Sabbath. Finally, the watching crowd rejoiced "all the wonderful things that [Jesus] was doing."

The origin of Sabbath practice can be attributed to the creation story in Genesis. After the initial forming of the world for six days, the creator God rests on the seventh day, bless (Gen. 2:3) and consider it holy (i.e. set boundaries around a day of rest). Religious rituals soon formed around the Sabbath in early Jewish communities, as well as all the dos and don'ts. The followers of the risen Jesus were mostly Jews, and the early church initially practiced Sabbath on the same day and observed the same manner of rest as the Jewish community.

In any case, the Luke passage has in its background this ongoing debate about Sabbath laws, its interpretation and its dos and don't. The gospel of Luke features the debate several times. In Luke 6, Jesus and his disciples plucked some heads of grain off a cornfield to eat on Sabbath because they were hungry, and, right after, healed a man with a withered hand. Both times, the religious leaders pointed out that what Jesus did was illegal. In Luke 14, one chapter after our passage, Jesus again healed another man on Sabbath.

I would like to begin by bracketing Jesus' view that the religious leaders are hypocrites. What I am going to say next does not seem like the Jesus-ly correct thing. But let us give the leaders the benefit of doubt that their initial intentions were good. After all, they were trying to uphold the order of faith and community in a time of big Roman government, an oppressive regime.

Now, if you look at what the leaders were indignant about, they did not object to any healing at all. What the leaders kept saying to the crowd was indeed objectively true. There were many opportunities for Jesus to heal; in fact, it was six days out of seven. The way that the leadership saw it: 1. Jesus acted intentionally

against Sabbath laws with his illegal actions. 2. The condition of the crippled woman could wait for another day after eighteen years. For all the leaders observed about Jesus, he was the one pursuing his own interest and trampling the Sabbath order.

Next, let us consider the woman, and also do so with equal generosity that we have given the leaders. It seemed that when the woman appeared in the synagogue, despite her physical abilities, she had been recognized as a regular there on Sabbath, may be even for the past eighteen years! So here, we have someone whose spine was so curved that she could not straighten up, and probably couldn't even see Jesus face to face at all. Yet, she was seen by Jesus, called over to be healed, and would certainly risk the disapproval of the leaders for all this to happen on Sabbath. And, how did she choose as a woman of faith? She trusted, stepped into the fray, and let herself be healed.

Anthropologists, who study the phenomenon of health and sickness across cultures, both ancient and modern, have learned that health and sickness are culturally defined. They distinguish between disease and illness. Disease is a biomedical malfunction that afflicts an organism. Illness is a socially disvalued state of being in which social networks have been disrupted and meaning lost. Our modern cultures focus on the disease aspect of sickness, and on restoring a sick person's ability to function and to do.

In the ancient Mediterranean cultures such as the ones we encounter in the bible, the focus is on the illness aspect of sickness, and on restoring a sick person to a valued state of being in which disrupted social networks are restored. Lest we think that those ancient cultures of Jesus' time are simply ignorant when it comes to the causes of diseases, they actually teach us about health and sickness of our social body. We would be reminded that, even when the knowledge of the disease is available, any willful superiority of the "ordinarily healthy" can still choose not to act, as seen in the examples of the AIDS epidemic, the "War on Drugs," the racial and economic disparities in healthcare access.

Sin and sickness go together in the biblical cultures. What is described in the New Testament is not so much disease as illness - an out-of-the-norm sociocultural human condition that cuts people off from their community. The sin of sickness, its suffering and the death that results, is not about the fault of the person who is sick. The sin is the way in which the sick had been excluded, stigmatized, or neglected and rendered invisible by those who around them are

ordinarily healthy. Temporarily healthy, mind you. In short, it is the community who is sinning against the person who is sick.

With the lens of illness as a disvalued state of being, perhaps we can better understand the way Luke introduces the woman as someone “with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years.” The spiritual reality of her illness was that her brokenness was connected to the complacency of her community and of its leaders. May be those among the crowd had not actively discriminated against her, but the religious leaders, in their objection to the Sabbath healing of her chronic suffering, gave permission to her continuing invisibility and unfreedom.

I was re-reading the 1963 Letter from a Birmingham Jail by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in which he was responding to a public statement of concern and caution issued by eight white religious leaders of the South who deemed the most recent civil rights protests and their methods as unwise and untimely. Dr. King seldom answered to criticism, but felt that these were men of genuine good will and that their criticism were sincerely set forth, therefore he sought to answer in patient and reasonable terms. About 3/5 into this long letter of response, Dr. King said,

“I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens Councilors or the Ku Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is **more devoted to order than to justice**; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says, ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by the myth of time ... the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually, time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively ... We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

More devoted to order than to justice. Setting a timetable for another person’s freedom. When the woman who had been crippled for the last eighteen years stepped out, what could she have been thinking? Maybe ... Not one more day?

What Jesus chose to do on Sabbath in this story in Luke is consistent with his calling by the Spirit of God back in chapter 4. To bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of God's favor. Remember that from the lens of illness rather than disease, the woman was sick because the community disvalued her. The sickness lies not in the woman's biomedical malfunction, but in the illness that the brokenness in relationship to the community.

The sacred worth of the woman, in her differently-abled body, was on Jesus' mind at the beginning. He saw her clearly and knew her suffering deeply. Jesus emphasized her as a daughter of Abraham to the leaders, just as they are descendent of Abraham. Jesus rebuked them for setting the timetable for her liberation from illness. The Lukan passage uses the ancient apocalyptic term "satanic bondage" to say that the disrupted social network she was subjected to violates God's will for her life.

Therefore, the leaders are not pursuing God-interest at all by delaying her liberation even for one day. Their good intention of upholding Sabbath to honor God becomes an attachment to be a good at maintaining law and order at the cost of human flourishing. Their impact on Sabbath actually gets in the way of God's kingdom breaking in and restoring the ruptured social network between the woman and the community. Their good intention to pursue God-interest ends up with pursuing their self-interest of being a good leader of Sabbath law.

In closing, I hope that my reflection will evoke your own reflection in your pursuit of God-interest as a disciple of Jesus, and in your discernment of the fruits of such intention. The personal pursuit happens not apart from the communal pursuit. So, let me borrow and adapt from the reflections written in a commentary on this gospel passage by biblical studies professor Emerson Powery. "This story is about the role and function of our religious traditions, our claims about what could and should be practiced or who is allowed within the walls of our religious communities ... These are stories about community. What kind of community do we want to be? And, do religious traditions help us to become that kind of community or do they hinder us?" Here, I would also add our collective sensibilities to the pulses of society. Do they help or hinder us? In the end, how will we meet the daughters of Abraham in our day? How will we meet all children of God in our times?

AMEN.