



SECOND PLACE

Luke 13:10-17

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“Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. For 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...”

Based on this verse, for millennia, the Jews have refrained from doing any work on the Sabbath, but it is a little more complicated than that. The Hebrew word מְלָאכָה, that we translate as “work” refers to creative activity, not simple manual labor. This is because God ceased creating on the 7th day to rest. There are 39 categories of activities, with a creative edge, one is forbidden from engaging in on the Sabbath, such as kneading, weaving, tying, untying, trapping, building a fire, extinguishing a fire. These activities are understood to be creative in how they assert control over your environment. Winnowing is forbidden, but also any activity of separation that turns inedible food into edible food. So, picking out fish bones from small fish is also forbidden under the winnowing category. Thus, the Ashkenazi Jews invented gefilte fish, a ground fish, for Sabbath consumption because it could be prepared in advance.

Ceasing creative work is essential in order to be physically, mentally, and spiritually present to the moment and meaning of Sabbath. Sabbath means to cease, to stop.

Most all of us are guilty of looking at smartphones, when we should truly be present to the person in front of us. The phones distract us as we find ourselves asking people to repeat things, along with a constant nagging feeling that we are forgetting something. We can feel in our times the critical importance of ceasing an activity in order to be fully present.

God’s gift of the Sabbath is one of the supreme gifts bestowed upon the Israelite people. They lived in a time in which the invention of the weekend was

thousands of years in the future. And, during those years, often only the wealthy ever were given rest. The Sabbath is a day of remembrance and observance. A time to remember God’s creative love in bringing the universe into being and in God’s gift of freedom from slavery – slavery from Egypt and being enslaved to the daily toil of life. It is a time to observe prayers and rituals that bring great joy, for it centers the Jew in the heart of God. As you have heard me quote before, “More than Israel has kept the Sabbath the Sabbath has kept Israel.” Sabbath is referred to as a bride or queen (Come my beloved, to meet the Sabbath bride).

There is something reassuring about the world today when you drive by a temple on Saturday as dozens of families walk there to say the same prayers said by their ancestors perhaps 3000 years before!

Proper appreciation of the Sabbath is critically important for our text this morning. The Sabbath laws, though many, were not simply bureaucratic red tape. They were not the contrivance of sadistic priest elites to control the masses. Jesus was interfering not only with culture and tradition, but God’s laws and, perhaps, the singular thing that has held the Jewish people together in all their adversity throughout history.

This woman had born her malady for 18 years. She had not even asked for healing nor expressed any faith in Him. Almost invariably, the recipients of Jesus’ healing power exhibit one or the other. So out of respect for tradition, He could have waited. But He did not and He must have had a very good reason. And, as trite and as simple as it sounds, that reason was love.

Today, Jews do have exceptions for the prohibitions on doing creative work on the Sabbath under the principle of *Pikuach Nefesh*, in which the

preservation of human life overrides virtually any other religious consideration. "We did everything to save lives, despite Shabbat. People asked, 'Why are you here? There are no Jews here', but we are here because the Torah orders us to save lives... We are desecrating Shabbat with pride..." (Mati Goldstein commander of the Jewish [ZAKA](#) rescue-mission to [2010 Haiti earthquake](#)[17], [www.ynetnews.com](#) 01.17.10)

But Jesus has taken it even further.

This woman's life was not in danger. But she was missing out on the love of God and the love of neighbor and, so, Jesus felt compelled to act. "The young man knows the rules, but the old man knows the exceptions." (Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.)

Jesus is showing us not all rules or laws are equal; some have priority. Ritual does not trump the principle on which it stands. God has created and given us many laws which are provisional not absolute; they must be filtered through the love of God and love of neighbor.

In fact, we see in Jesus Christ that God places the need to love and honor Him in second place when the immediate needs of loving our neighbor present itself. That is the servant, self-sacrificing nature of God in Jesus Christ seen clearly on the cross.

In the face of suffering, God would rather be put in second place; the Sabbath was meant to honor God, but God will step aside when people are afflicted.

But Jesus did more for her, showed her even deeper love, than only physical healing could bring.

Take for example the man with the withered hand. He commands him to stretch it out and so he does. But in this case he touches the woman.

The touch of another sometimes heals something deeper than physical maladies. The miracle of mom's kisses that can deaden the pain of a skinned knee or the hand on the shoulder in the hospital sends waves of warmth in the afflicted.

In Jesus' time, anyone with an evil spirit was unclean and would not know the loving touch of

another. Jesus often included physical touch when healing the unclean.

Not only does His touch directly nourish her soul, but it would open her up to being welcomed and restored with her people. When the crowd witnessed Jesus' touch, they saw a respected, powerful man deem her clean and so they would as well.

This welcome is underscored by His words, "If you can loose a donkey why not loose a child of Abraham." By calling her daughter of Abraham, he is again underscoring her full part in the community of the people which her uncleanness would have prevented.

Jesus elevates healing, compassion, and love above ritual observances even ones that honor God. Many Presbyterian churches are dying on the vine because they fail to note this fact. They are so entrenched in the beauty of the past and the power of that tradition, that they have allowed the expression of love to become secondary. As wonderful and central as this tradition is, we must never let this happen here. As a Presbytery Executive, I saw churches whose annual reports filled shelves for decades and when I opened them the stories were virtually identical. Even the dusty ones from the turn of the previous century. Unfortunately, the world changed, they were left behind because they lost that compassion and their halls and classes are now empty and have become libraries or even breweries, or perhaps bulldozed into history. At least one church had essentially become a museum. They had a beautifully maintained sanctuary supported by a large endowment exclusively used for the building. The only problem was they had 20 members left and no mission to the neighborhood filled with hungry people.

The darkly satirical author Kurt Vonnegut was asked by someone from Pittsburgh "Please tell me it will all be okay" [the contemporary version of eternal life]. In classic Vonneguttian fashion he replied with a quote from his book *God Bless You*,

Mr. Rosewater in which the protagonist is preparing a speech for his neighbors' twins' baptism,

Welcome to earth babies. It's hot in the summer and cold in the winter. It's round wet and crowded. At the outside you've got about a 100 years. There's only one rule that I know of; G'd!?* it! You've got to be kind.

Our charge as church, as Jesus' ambassadors, is to give glory to God and know the enriching power of prayer. But we also, as Vonnegut suggests, must stop complaining about the world being a rotten place and make something out of it with the kindness, compassion, and love of Christ.

We must embrace and treasure both rules and tradition. They are God's gift to us that offer a sense of order and security. This rhythm can help sustain us and nourish us through unpredictable times. But as Jesus did, we need to be willing to throw them out the door if they become a barrier to loving one another. If they prevent us from showing the kindness of Christ to a neighbor.