

SERMON TITLE: "Sabbath Freedom"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 13:10-17
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: August 25, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Next Sunday I'm going to begin a September sermon series called "Teach Us to Pray." We'll begin that series with a focus on the Lord's Prayer. Today, though, I'm preaching from the Lectionary. The Lectionary is a three-year rotation of scriptures that are assigned to each Sunday. Some denominations use the lectionary in a rigid and mandatory way. Some churches and preachers never use the lectionary. And some of us use it sometimes, when it fits in with what we're up to. That's me today. I read this assigned Gospel text and thought, yes, "Sabbath Freedom," that's a good message for us to hear.

Because this is a text about freedom, it seems like it requires a more free-style structure than my usual two or three points. So today, we're going to do a guided meditation, and I'm inviting you to just let yourself loose in this story. Think of it like you're at the movie theater with a great big screen and surround sound. Maybe you're even wearing 3-D glasses. Relax. You're in a safe place. Sit yourself comfortably and breathe deeply. Roll your shoulders, if that feels good to you. Stretch out your arms and wiggle your fingers. And relax again. Breathe deeply. Are you ready to see and hear and experience and feel? OK. Here we go.

EXPERIENCING THE STORY

"Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath." Can you see Jesus there? Who else is in the synagogue with him? Can you imagine a grandfather there? A father? A brother? A son? Women didn't play as prominent a role in the synagogue, but they were there too. Can you see a grandmother there? How about a mother? A sister? Now, among all those relatives, do you also see some neighbors? Do you see yourself? In that synagogue gathering, do you see some elderly, some

young families, and some teenagers? Do you hear some babies? As you study the faces gathered there on that holy day, can you see and hear some well-earned wisdom? Some tough-guy stubbornness? Some compassionate concern? Some brotherly camaraderie? Some attempt to cover and hide self-doubt? Some obviously heavy burdens? Some jockeying for social rank? Some desire for meaning and purpose? Can you hear the gossip and jokes that are told there? Can you picture whom those stories build up and whom they put down?

Jesus was there, in that group of Jewish faithful. With all their hopes and disappointments, all their possibilities and problems, all their righteousness and sinfulness—there they were, gathered as God’s people. Partly out of cultural tradition, partly out of religious responsibility, partly out of spiritual longing and desire—they had come to sing, to pray, and to read and discuss the scriptures. They had come to connect with God and each other. Can you feel yourself among them?

“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.” Do you see her? Is she elderly and bent over from osteoporosis? Is the crippling spirit the agonizing arthritic pain in her back? Or is she young—maybe no more than 18—a woman who was born with some kind of spinal deformity? Or is she in her middle age—once vibrant and full of life, but for the past 18 years weighed down by grief and poverty after the death of her husband? Is she bent over in shame because her husband abandoned her for another woman? Is she bent over in brokenness because she was the victim of some kind of violent and emotional trauma? Even though it wasn’t her fault, can you sense the depth of her shame, that spirit that has crippled her and held her in bondage for so long?

And yet, here she is. She didn’t stay home and hide. She picked herself up and pulled herself together enough to come to the synagogue on the Sabbath. Sure, she got there a little late, after Jesus had already started teaching. With a crippled body and spirit, it might take longer to get going in the morning. To convince yourself to get up and go out and face people. But she did. She came to meet

God and spend time in worship—maybe like she did every Sabbath day. Or maybe she had heard that the guest rabbi Jesus was there, and so she made an extra effort this time, in desperation and hope.

Fortunately, this time it *was* different because Jesus was there. Can you see Jesus teaching those gathered around him in the synagogue? Can you now see the bent over woman enter the room? Can you see Jesus notice her? Can you hear Jesus stop his discussion of the Torah or the Prophets and turn his words to the woman? Can you hear him call her toward him? Can you hear him say, **“Woman you are set free from your ailment”**? Can you see Jesus lay his hands on her shoulders? Can you feel strength coming into her body? Can you feel her muscles and bones straightening up? Can you see her standing tall? Can you feel the joy welling up inside her as she lifts her voice in praise to God?

One Bible commentator has written the woman’s story like this:

She was bent and burdened, bound by Lord knows what. It took courage to come into the house of God, risking harsh judgment or painful stares, unable to hide her broken stature. After all, who wants to reveal their suffering, especially in the sanctuary? She may have thought, ‘What if I cry? What if they see? What if I am rejected? But this woman overcame all that. She didn’t throw herself at Jesus’ feet, didn’t ask for healing. But Jesus saw her, spoke words of liberation, and reached out to touch her brokenness. Healed, this beloved daughter raised her body and voice in praise to God.

(Ginger Gaines-Cirelli, *The CEB Women’s Bible*, c. 2016, p.1315)

There’s a television program that I like to watch. It’s called *Queen Sugar*, and it’s in season four on the Oprah Winfrey Network. It’s about an African American family that grew up farming sugar cane in Louisiana. Part of them still earn their living that way. One of the members of the family is a young woman named Darla. Darla has had addiction issues that took her pretty far down. In recent years, she’s made great strides to improve her life, but her addiction is an on-going struggle. In the latest episode, an old friend revealed some information that Darla didn’t know before. One time when Darla was young and they were at a party, Darla had actually been raped. Darla had been too high to give consent, to protect herself, or to remember what had happened. As the episode played out, it became apparent that the extreme difficulties of Darla’s addiction could be tied, in large part, to that trauma, and shame of that sexual assault. Fortunately, Darla had an understanding family who could offer grace

and perspective. They offered the healing mercy Darla needed. Like Jesus and the bent-over woman, Darla's family was willing to stop what they were doing and help her gain freedom from her crippling spirit.

Unfortunately, the story of Jesus and the bent-over woman doesn't end with her straightened back and freedom from the crippling spirit, however. Are you still there in the synagogue? As the woman stands upright and begins praising God, do you see what else is happening? While some were rejoicing with her, others were beginning to fidget and frown. Can you see them turning to each other in whispers? Can you see some of them starting to stand up in protest? Can you tell that **"The leader of the synagogue [was] indignant that Jesus had cured on the Sabbath"**? Can you hear his tone of voice as he says, **"There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day."**

Do you notice that the synagogue leader isn't directly criticizing Jesus, the strong male guest teacher, but that, instead, the synagogue leader chastises the woman who has been bent over in weakness for 18 long and horrible years? At worst, we could say he was a bully, taking full advantage of his power differential over this woman who had already suffered more than enough. At best, he was a well-meaning but limited spiritual leader who let the letter of the law get in the way of the spirit of God's loving care. When *you* put *yourself* in the synagogue and hear the leader say these words, which way does it sound to *you*? What words of healing would *you* want and need your spiritual leader to say to *you*?

Or to look at this story from another angle: Inasmuch as you are a spiritual leader in your family, in this congregation, or in a small group within the church, what ways have you ever valued law, structure, and orderliness over kindness, empathy, and healing? Are there times when you have been unnecessarily strict or harsh? Are there times when you have enforced a rule that is generally good, but in certain circumstances might not be the best response? As Jesus suggested, are there times when you

have treated your ox or your donkey or your dog or your cat better than you have treated a human being—a daughter or son of Abraham?

Are you still there in the synagogue? If so, can you feel the shift that occurred? Can you feel the burden of shame lifted off the woman? Can you see that it was transferred, so that now **“all [Jesus’] opponents were put to shame”**? It wasn’t that there had to be winners and losers. It wasn’t that someone had to be right and someone else had to be wrong. It wasn’t that, if someone became strong, someone else had to become weak. It didn’t have to be like that. God’s grace is sufficiently abundant for all. But, apparently, some people didn’t want to accept what Jesus was saying. So they continued to oppose him, even while public opinion was changing all around them.

Are you still there in the synagogue? Which side are you on? Are you among the opponents? Or are you part of **“the entire crowd [that] was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that Jesus was doing”**?

CONCLUSION

There are some pretty classic instructions that God has given us to guide our lives in healthy and fulfilling ways. For the most part, those rules don’t change very much. But in every culture and time, there have been some different sources of blame and shame. Growing up in NW Montana, I recall one time when my dad flashed some shame at me because I didn’t use the correct word for a female elk. Obviously, knowing your wildlife vocabulary was an important value in that hunting culture.

Today, we might be ashamed that we don’t know how to use a computer very well. And, in times past, when a girl might have been shamed by a boy pressing himself upon her, now the boy is being told he should be ashamed for not asking permission first.

The good news is that—in the synagogue and in the church—loving respect, human dignity, and healing kindness are always the most important values. And this is how we gain our Sabbath freedom.