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# Sabbath, Freedom, Justice

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A Sermon By  
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August 21, 2016

Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

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The Ninth Sunday After Pentecost  
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Isaiah 58:9b-14      Psalm 103:1-8      Luke 13:10-17

Jesus is still heading toward Jerusalem, this morning, still urgent about his mission. But today, he is honoring the sabbath, keeping it holy, teaching in a synagogue along the way. As he is teaching, a woman appears among the worshippers. She has a spirit that has crippled her for 18 years, keeping her bent over, quite unable to stand up straight.

As the story unfolds, Jesus continues his teaching, showing us and those present the full meaning of sabbath, in action and words.

The woman is easily overlooked in a crowd of upright worshipers. But Jesus sees her. He calls her to him. “Woman, you are set free from your ailment,” he says. And when he lays hands on her, immediately she stands up straight and begins praising God, in a spirit like that of this morning’s psalm: “Bless the Lord, O my soul.” “Bless the Lord, O my essential being” is the literal translation.

“Woman, you are *set free*.” Early in Luke, when Mary and Joseph bring the infant Jesus to the Temple, Simeon takes the child in his arms and sings (in the familiar canticle from Evening Prayer) : “Lord, you now have *set* your servant *free* to go in peace as you have promised; for these eyes of mine have seen the Savior, whom you have prepared for all the world to see . . . .” (Lk. 2:29-31; BCP 120)

Standing straight, this woman now sees the Savior face to face. Set free, unbound, like Simeon she praises God with her whole being.

The leader of the synagogue is scandalized. He *answers* Jesus’ liberation not by praising God, but by *scolding* the congregation. *Don’t come around here on the Sabbath looking for a cure. That’s work; that’s for the rest of the week.*

He may have a point. On the seventh day, the sabbath, God rested from the work of creation and blessed the sabbath. Therefore, on Mt. Sinai with Moses, God commanded the people, “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 . . . .” (Ex. 20:8-11)

The synagogue leader sees Jesus’ unbinding the woman as having “cured” on the sabbath; that is, having practiced medicine, done work. Even if that were so, though, there is an exception in the tradition for performing any “work” that would save a life.

All of you *untie* your animals on the sabbath so they can drink water and stay alive, Jesus says to his opponents. We can’t tell from the translation, but “untie” (for the animals) and “set free” (for the woman) are the same word in the Greek here. Jesus has set this woman free from a kind of living death. Her healing *is* a matter of life and death.

More than that, there is another piece of tradition about the sabbath.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses, pauses at the Jordan after leading the Israelites through the Exodus from Egypt and for 40 years in the wilderness. He is not going with them into the promised land, and he is concerned for their welfare.

For 33 long chapters (it must have taken all day), dear, dear Moses goes over everything with them again, the stories of Exodus, the time in the wilderness, and all the commandments and law the Lord has given them. He tells it all again, reinterprets it for them, so they will remember to be faithful. (“Deuteronomy” means “second law.”)

After reminding the people of the commandment to rest and do no work on the sabbath, Moses adds this: “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, *therefore* the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” (Dt. 5:15; emphasis added)

The sabbath is intimately linked with *being set free*. It is a day to remember and be grateful that God is a God of justice and mercy who sets us from from every bond. It is a day to rejoice and take delight in freedom—from work, yes, but also from hopelessness and despair. It is a day of justice, a day to let all the oppressed go free.

This morning’s reading from Isaiah comes from the period *after* Israel’s exile in Babylon, in the sixth century BCE. The people are newly released from captivity, newly returned to the land. Isaiah speaks of justice, and of honoring the sabbath. Sabbath and justice are still linked.

I think about what sabbaths might have been like for the exiles while they were in Babylon. We have no written record to tell us. But the Israelites must have remembered and observed the sabbath in the midst of Babylon’s pagan culture, keeping alive their identity as God’s people. Especially, I believe, on the sabbath holding on to their confidence and hope in the God of justice and liberation.

The question in the air after their return to the land is, *How will we live together now, now that we have been set free, restored by the grace and mercy of God?*

Isaiah proclaims that the peace and welfare of the community continue to depend on compassion and justice, on “remov[ing] the yoke from among you,” the yoke of oppression. Feed the hungry, take care of those who are suffering. Stand up for others’ freedom. Remember the sabbath, to keep all your relationships holy.

When the woman in the gospel story enters the synagogue, she cannot easily see her way forward. She sees mostly feet, the dust, the shadows on the ground. She cannot look her neighbors in the face.

We don’t know how she came to be bound by the spirit that held her captive. But we all know something of being weighed down, heavy of heart and spirit.

We know the weight of our sin: the choices we make against our own good and our neighbors’. We can be weighed down and shaken by the sin of the world: wars, violence, and injustice at home and around the world. We know of terrible natural disasters caused or aggravated by

policies and choices we don't control. We are in the midst of a disturbing, divisive, even potentially dangerous presidential campaign.

How do we live in these difficult and challenging times, without shutting ourselves off or becoming weighed down by a spirit of despair?

Today's scriptures lead me to one answer: Sabbath. We can come to see the sabbath for what it is meant to be: a day of liberation, a day that comes around every week for celebrating that in Christ our soul, our essential self, is *not bound* by *any* spirit of evil that would trouble us.

This is the day we gather in community to remember who and whose we are. To bless the Lord with all that is in us. To confess the evil we have done, the evil that enslaves us, and the evil done on our behalf; and receive forgiveness.

Whatever experiences or news may weigh heavy upon us, this is the day when we are bid to lift up our hearts; and we lift them to the Lord. We are reminded that in the Word made flesh, God has delivered us from evil and made us worthy to stand before him.

On this and every sabbath day, we receive the good news of the Gospel in our hearts, so that *we* may speak and live the truth of God's justice and mercy for all people. So that, in the words of the prophet Isaiah, *we* may "be called the repairer[s] of the breach." Not the breach in Jerusalem's city wall when the exiles returned from Babylon; but, in our day, the breach in our relationships, across religious, racial, ethnic, economic and ideological lines. Sabbath is a blessing for us that we may be a blessing in the world around us.

On this and every sabbath day, we are fed in body and spirit so that *we* may have the strength to face into the fears and dangers of the world and of our own lives, speak the truth about them, and engage with them in ways that are healing and liberating for ourselves and others. \

The peace and justice of our community and our nation depend upon it.