

August 21, 2016 -14th Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 13:11-17
The Rev. Carenda Baker

We began a series of sermons on July 24th, to explore the question “Who is Jesus?” Looking through the lens of the appointed Sunday Scriptures, we have tried to gain perspective for answering that question for ourselves, and for our parish. Today is the final sermon I will offer in this series.

The gospel reading for today points us to some of the most-well known descriptions that have been offered when people are asked that question – Who is Jesus? Luke’s gospel reveals that Jesus is teacher, healer, liberator, Savior.

Let’s revisit the story. It is the Sabbath, and Jesus is at worship in the synagogue, teaching. He notices among the worshipers a woman with a crippling condition, who has lived with it for 18 years, who is able to stand only in a bent-over position. The woman’s world is defined by the small piece of ground around her feet, and whatever she can look at “on a slant”, when she turns her head and eyes side to side. Jesus calls her over, declares her freed from her ailment, lays hands on her and she immediately stands up straight and begins praising God.

Of course there were other worshipers present that day. One leader of the synagogue is offended by what Jesus has done, and says to those gathered, “We have 6 days to do our work. Come back for your cure on one of those days, not today on the sabbath.” The worshipers, Jesus, and the now healed woman standing up straight have heard this challenge to what has just taken place. Jesus offers a rebuttal: “Don’t you untie your animals and lead them to get a drink on the Sabbath? Doesn’t this woman, a daughter of Abraham, have at least as much right to be set free from bondage on the Sabbath day?”

Now part of what is happening here is that two faithful and observant Jewish men are having a difference of opinion about how to keep the Sabbath, how to be faithful. The Ten Commandments, which is where the rule about Sabbath keeping originates, are found in two places in the Hebrew Scriptures. The first place is in Exodus 20, where Moses initially delivers them to the people of Israel. The explanation given for keeping the Sabbath in the Exodus account is based in God’s act of creation, all the work having been completed in six days, and then the 7th set aside for rest, and declared holy. The other place the Ten Commandments appear is in Deuteronomy 5, where God’s work of creation is not mentioned as a reason for keeping sabbath. The reason given for the commandment to observe and keep the Sabbath holy in Deuteronomy is framed as an act of remembrance of being liberated. *“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.”* The leader of the synagogue is focused on keeping the commandment to rest, just as God did after the work of creation. That order to rest and do no work on the Sabbath is God’s gift to creation, allowing for renewal, refreshment, and refocusing on

God. The synagogue leader is not mean-spirited in what he says. He doesn't object to healing or healing this particular woman. Her condition is not life-threatening, so healing can wait until the observance of Sabbath is over. The synagogue leader is right – the commandment says you are not supposed to do any work on the Sabbath.

Jesus, however, interprets the commandment about observing the Sabbath through the lens of God's act of liberation - freeing the Israelites from bondage, and setting them on a new path moving toward a new land, a land of promise. Sabbath keeping is not only about rest and honoring God as holy. It is also about freedom and promise and praise. Because the purpose of Sabbath rest is to be free to praise God, Jesus sees it as necessary to free this bound woman so she can do precisely that – praise God.

There is a conflict of interpretation about how best to be obedient and faithful in Sabbath keeping. Luke gives us earlier in his gospel Jesus' mission statement - to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of God's favor.

Jesus' action in healing the bent over woman is entirely consistent with his mission statement. They are living in God's time, God's kingdom is breaking through in a new way, and the right time for grace and mercy is NOW. What better time to heal than on the Sabbath? Jesus does not disregard the law. He bends the law toward grace.

When have you ever found yourself in a position like that of Jesus and the synagogue leader – weighing the cost of adhering to the rules to maintain order and peace, with the cost of bending the law in order to show mercy and grace? This is the stuff of moral and ethical decision-making.

Truth be told, we regularly agree with the synagogue leader's approach, not necessarily about the Sabbath but about other things important to us. Most of us have laws that we think are particularly important and we get nervous if we see people not respecting them. Whatever it is, there are some laws we believe you just need to keep. And if you don't, who knows what might unravel next?

The thing is, it seems easier to set our focus narrowly on doing things right, than it is to focus on doing the right thing. Showing mercy will sometimes clash with the rules of the systems of which we are a part – religious, social, economic, legal. These are the systems that give order and stability to our lives

My hunch is we have all been in the position of that synagogue leader, standing firm in our convictions, and totally justified in keeping the letter of the law by doing things right. But we have also at some point in life been that woman, bent over and bowed down, captive to one thing or another, needing to be freed, to be healed, to be set on a path of promise and new life. I wonder how it felt to her, the bent over woman, those first few breaths of air, taken in by lungs no longer cramped from stooping over? And whose eyes did she first meet, as she stood up straight for the first time in anyone's memory?

It takes someone like Jesus to set her free, and to set us free – someone who will heal, liberate, and save – setting us on the path toward eventual wholeness. I am convinced that Jesus was able to see a situation and bend the law toward grace because he had learned how to make the longest journey any of us makes - the 9 inches from head to heart. The journey that enables us to move from doing things right and by the rules, to doing the more expansive right and life-giving thing. The journey from head to heart is the Spirit's work of conversion in us, bending our hearts toward grace.

Roman Catholic priest and spiritual writer Henri Nouwen said that the call of a disciple is to love Jesus, and to love the way Jesus loved. I don't know how it is for you on your faith journey. In my experience, loving Jesus is a whole lot easier than loving the way Jesus loved.

The only way I know how to learn to love the way Jesus loved is to spend frequent time in God's presence, accepting that I am totally accepted in whatever condition I am, and whatever I have done or not done – and assured that God's love will transform me. Coming before God just like that bent over woman came when Jesus called her, stooped before him, feeling the touch of his hands, receiving the rich grace and mercy he offered. She is freed in that moment from the powers that worked against her health, wholeness and freedom.

Something changes in us in the act of receiving and extending mercy. Hearts get stretched. Hands get opened. Hope gets restored. Pain gets relieved. Healing brings new life. A community grows more attentive, more responsive, deeper in solidarity with its neighbors. And yes, good and legitimate rules sometimes will get bent or broken.

There is no need for us to wait until tomorrow or next week to receive healing, liberation, and salvation. The grace and mercy Jesus extended centuries ago are there for us to receive NOW, in whatever condition we find ourselves at this moment. In the presence of mercy, the light and love of Christ seeps through the cracks of our broken world to heal all of us. This is the marvelous witness Pope Francis is sharing in this year he has designated "A Jubilee Year of Mercy". Pope Francis says, "Mercy is the beating heart of the gospel."

So our call as disciples of the Jesus movement is to love Jesus – to accept our need of God's mercy and to receive it gratefully, willing and ready to be changed by it. And it is also our call to love the way Jesus loved – to be ready to bend the law toward compassion and love in our actions, witnessing that the blessed moment of God's mercy for all – is right here and right now.