

Lectionary 21C

August 21, 2022

Isaiah 58:9b-14; Psalm 103:1-8; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

Grace and peace to you, from the One who was, who is, and who is to come. Amen.

The potted tomato plant was heavier than I thought, the container ceramic not plastic. By the time I got it from the front steps to the back deck and up on the porch, standing up straight was a challenge. My back wanted to stay in that bent over position. It reminded me that my back is a lot older than it once was, and it also reminded me of the tricks I learned over the years for moving things that were really too heavy for me to carry.

For example, I discovered dragging when our daughters went to camp. Somehow, they seemed to need to pack absolutely every item of clothing they owned: every shoe, sneaker and slipper; and every hair, nail, skin, and body lotion product in CVS. All of it went into their camp trunks – real trunks of wood and metal, not soft duffle bags with wheels like today. And of course, there was bedding beside. There was only one way to get that trunk from car to cabin: dragging. And it took both mom and daughter to manage, sliding it along well-worn dirt paths. I think we saw and tripped every root, rock and rut along the way, but we got there.

By the time college dorms came along, I learned about those wonderful sliders, carpet on one side to slide along wood floors; plastic on the other for sliding on carpets. Still it was the tiles in the floor and the pattern in the carpet that I remember from moving day - walls and windows were too high up for my bent back to notice.

In fact, a bent back is the only way for most of us to carry a heavy load, whether it's a suitcase or a potted plant, a school backpack, or a week's worth of groceries. And when the burden is heavy and you are overloaded there is only one way to look: and that is down.

There's not much to see when you focus in one direction – the step in front, yes; maybe the next one as well. Nothing on the side, nothing up ahead. Bent in one direction, up or down, is a pretty limited line of sight. Then again, we aren't always very good at seeing when we look around either. We miss the sun and stars, the neighbors and the folks just walking by; the possibilities in a sky of cumulus clouds that take our imaginations to great places; the dashed hopes in the dark places we scurry past on the way to brighter destinations. The weight of our cares distracts us; the burdens that the world sets on our shoulders put us down. After while, we don't even try to look around.

Take the woman in the today's gospel story: it's been 18 years that she's been bent over, and not because of her own foolishness or over consumption. She is crippled by a spirit that has sapped the strength and flexibility of her body, tying her down as surely as if ropes and wires had secured her to the ground. People hardly seem to notice her any more - they just automatically scurry around and past what must be a very slow moving form as she wends her way through the crowded streets and finds herself at the place of worship, hoping to find a space where she can at least hear the prayers in the synagogue even if she won't be able to see the altar or the rabbi over the heads and shoulders of her able-bodied neighbors. Maybe she's even gotten used to this position, given up hope for relief, much less a cure. Yet, on this Sabbath, like so many others in her years of suffering, she will come to temple any way to keep holy the Sabbath, praising God for creation anyway; acknowledging her need for him anyway; giving thanks, anyway. *Remember the Sabbath day*, God told the people through Moses, *and keep it holy*. God did that after all, resting after the work of creation - not because he was tired, of course, but so that he might enjoy the fruit of his labor, the goodness of the created world.

It's no easy task, as you well know, maintaining joy and hope in the face of blow after blow, disappointment after disappointment. When life has you looking down all the time it's hard to see the light. It's only when you come through the darkest patch that your eyes begin to focus and find the glimmers of light that weren't evident at first. Finding the balance between persistent hope and realistic adjustment is always a challenge. Finding joy in what one *can* do and in how one *can* be doesn't eliminate the lament for what once was and the wish for what might be again, even as that trunk gets heavier and heavier, and finding a solution seems less and less possible.

But this woman isn't the only one who is weighed down and bent over in the story today. When Jesus releases the woman from the grip of the Satanic spirit that had crippled her for so long, the obvious delight and cheering that she and the people around her felt was not shared by all. The leader of the synagogue - the one charged with making sure that Sabbath worship took place properly, according to the time-honored, traditional pattern - was bent over his books and traditions. He got stuck on the word "rest" in describing Sabbath keeping, unable to see "holiness" in the long-overdue healing of this woman. Waiting from his perspective is easy: what's one more day, after all, in the course of 18 years - easy to say when it's not your 18 years. On this Sabbath, like so many others, he has come to keep holy the Sabbath in the way he always does, discharging his responsibilities to dot the I's and cross the T's so that worship will happen correctly. He cannot see another way because he's looking down at the letter of the law rather than up at the people in the community; down at what was rather than up at the One who has come to fulfill that same law.

Then again, maybe he does understand the higher call to compassion over rules to be obeyed. Maybe what ties him down to the old system is fear - fear that the change that is coming through this One from Galilee will unloose more than a bent back. Maybe he is afraid of the freedom to decide, afraid of the responsibility to make choices and decisions based on the need for compassion and justice and mercy rather than a one-size-fits-all rule that looks not at the person, not at the setting, not at the need, but at a single sentence in an ages old tome.

When he stands with that packing list in hand, it is easier to just check off item one and be done, rather than to risk making a different decision or a difficult one. It *is* easier to just look down at the same old rut than to forge a new path, isn't it? Just tell me what to do, Lord, and I'll do it.

The afflicted woman and the restrictive leader are both bound: one has no choice and the other makes a poor choice; one is not seen and the other does not see - and even as both come to pray and praise God on the Sabbath, neither really expects much to change. Maybe we don't expect much from Sabbath worship either.

But in the midst of lives filled with too much challenge and not enough rest, the Sabbath is just what each of us really needs. God calls us to a day and a time to step back, to remember whose we are and where we came from; a day to rest from our work or school, our routines and our chores. It is a time to intentionally set aside the things weighing us down, to look up and around. Sabbath is a chance to take a real look and see all the ways in which God's handiwork surrounds us; to savor the variety and magnitude of the earth and its people and plants and creatures; to enjoy others and to be part of a caring community; to imagine the world's initial goodness and catch glimpses of its restorations. Sabbath allows us to see those around us with bent backs, and to see ways in which we can be present for one another.

Sure, we are busy people and a tired people. After a week of work, or a season of struggle or periods of waiting that stretch into years, it is sometimes easier to just go through the motions and not expect too much of this Sabbath rest and renewal. When we are challenged by the burden of illness and separation, worry and fear, shrinking resources and mounting bills, the baggage seems awfully heavy to drag along.

The challenge is even greater for us when we look up realize that even the "right" and "proper" and "traditional" expectations we have may be tying us and others down, leading us along a rutted path rather opening up a lighter, brighter way.

It has been my experience that whenever we are absolutely sure we know what path God wants us to follow and exactly how God expects us to worship, we start tying

ourselves in knots, adding *must* and *should* and *have to* burdens to our lives under the guise of “God said”.

When we get stuck - tuning out the words of hope in scripture, missing the joy of Sabbath song and the blessing of worship together - we tie ourselves down as surely as the bent woman and the letter-of-the-law leader.

Like some of you I remember Sunday Sabbaths with no stores open, no laundry hanging on the line, no household repairs on the agenda and no yard work. Ten a.m. sharp found us at church, with had and gloves and lots of sitting still. The Sunday afternoon drive in the country was our foray into nature and our celebration of the creation that God declared good. But like those “good old days” of fifties and sixties sit-coms, I’m not so sure that even then, in the absence of commerce and the silence of machines, we managed to keep the Sabbath holy as God would like it. We are creatures easily distracted, often forgetful, and prone to looking down, or maybe at our neighbors mistakes.

According to Deuteronomy 5:12-15, the Sabbath, at its heart, offers a weekly reassertion of how much God values freedom and restoration, not just for us but for all of creation. Hear the words:

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you. 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 -- you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. 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.

Keeping a holy Sabbath involves looking around and seeing God among us. It involves being the people God calls us to be. Like Jesus who came to the temple to worship and teach but saw with compassion the woman with the bent back and tired spirit, we also need to pause and see the needs around us; to take time to appreciate and care for other people and the earth itself. Like the woman unbound and those who celebrated her restoration, there is much joy to be found when we look up and experience the holy.

Holy in the sense of whole.

Holy in the sense of healing.

Holy in the sense of joy filled.

Holy in the sense of God-focused.

As the days of summer wind down and the pace of preparation ratchets up, take another opportunity to step aside and breathe. God is there.

As the challenges of health or work or relationships seem to mount up like rocks on the seashore, take a moment to notice the quiet spaces. God is there

As the unknown future looms ahead and the landscape of life changes literally and figuratively, take a moment to remember the old and then celebrate the new. God is in both of those, too.

The Lord of the Sabbath sees us even in the midst of all our burdens, ever ready to lighten our load, ease our waiting, and lift our spirits.

So, See! Stretch! Share! Smile!

Worship with joy and savor God's good creation, and you will truly experience the blessing of Sabbath.

Amen.

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