

Proper 16 Year C, Track 2 – August 21, 2022
St. Gregory's Episcopal Church, Long Beach – sermon by Ruth Eller

If you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth. . . .

(Isaiah 58)

Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 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. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

(Luke 13)

One: The Sabbath

Many years ago, in what's called a "pulpit exchange", a local rabbi visited the parish of which I was a member. The subject he chose for his sermon was the Sabbath. An excellent choice, for two reasons: first, it is something our traditions have in common, though we observe the Sabbath on different days. Second, most of us Christians don't talk about it nearly enough. It was helpful to be reminded of just how important the Sabbath is to us.

Why don't we talk about the Sabbath? I suspect it's because we don't want to seem old-fashioned or fussy or judgmental. The Puritans talked a lot about the Sabbath—and we certainly don't want to be like them! Then there were all those so-called blue laws, right into modern times. Vestiges remain in certain areas. Try to buy a six pack in Utah on a Sunday.

Don't worry—I'm not here to rail against drinking or working or playing cards or doing anything else on the Sabbath. I'm definitely not interested in making *laws* about Sabbath-keeping. That would be to force one reading of my religious tradition onto everyone else.

However—the Sabbath does *mean something to us*, no? I mean, here we all are, on a sunny summer morning, cooped up inside, singing funny old songs and popping up and down as the service takes us. In a little while we'll share a ritual meal of tiny portions of bread and wine--and then partake of something more substantial in that other ritual we call "Coffee Hour".

Why do we carry on like this?

I guess for some mysterious reason this day is important to us. It's the day when we give thanks to what- or who-ever gave us this world and brought us together. We hear the old stories, and think about them, and pray that they may be reflected in our lives the rest of the week. This is our day of rest, our time-out-of-time. We call it holy.

Two: Healing on the Sabbath

Jesus certainly thought the Sabbath was holy. He prayed and read from scripture and taught in the synagogue on the Sabbath. But for Jesus, this holy time was not about following the rules. It was about—well, holiness. And what could be more holy than the relief of suffering?

In today's gospel, he reaches out without even being asked: *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. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

You know, there are a lot of stories about healing and other so-called miracles in the gospels. I don't want to get into medical or scientific plausibility here. When we come across one of these episodes, what I think we should be asking is not, "Could this really happen?", but rather: of all the stories that must have been told about Jesus, why does Luke (or Matthew or whoever) choose to tell this one? What is its *meaning*? Because if it's just, "Gee whiz, wasn't that amazing?" – who cares? What I want to know is, what does it *say to me*, what's the *point*?

I think the meaning of this story is pretty clear: Jesus *notices*. Jesus *cares*. Jesus is ready to help us raise our eyes from the ground and stand up straight. He can liberate us from whatever has been keeping us down. Yes, even if we are a bent-over and no-account old woman—or some other kind of person who has been bound by the satanic forces that are always trying to take over the world. Jesus reaches out to assure us that we are of some account. As the woman who was bent over was a daughter of Abraham, so is each of us a child in God's family, and beloved.

And what better day than the Lord's Day, to work against the dark powers that try to cripple us, to bind us, in whatever ways they can? Let that percolate for a while. You're in this holy place, in this holy Sabbath-time. What might Jesus be reaching out to free you from right now? What's holding you back, tying you down, keeping you from looking up at the stars?

Finally: Sabbath, Healing, and Our Calling

When Covid 19 drove us all behind masks and closed doors, we were sent those helpful checks, and told to spend them for what we and the local economy needed. One thing I started to do was take my laundry to a place where somebody does it for you—you know, "fluff and fold". I also decided to give a good tip to the woman who does most of the work there. I'm still doing this. She does a great job, and I'm spared hiking up and down to my apartment building's basement all the time. Anyway—I eventually discovered that this woman never gets a day off. Seven days a week, eight or more hours a day, she does other people's laundry. I don't understand all the reasons for this, but I do know it is wrong. She never gets a Sabbath.

She is one of many. When I was working with the missions in the Bay Area, the Spanish-speaking congregations often held their services in the evening, and not always on a Sunday. Many of their members held two or more jobs. A day off—a Sabbath? Forget it. That was a luxury they could not afford. (Also wrong, don't you think?) Yet these people found a few hours of holy time-out-of-time to gather with their families and friends and let Jesus lift them up.

I realize that some of you here today may be in that situation yourselves. I hope you do feel the liberating love of Christ, lifting you up and affirming your worthiness.

As for the rest of us: let's bear in mind these oft-quoted words of St. Teresa:

Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

Our Christian calling is to extend the rest and holiness of the Sabbath to all our neighbors, whatever their tradition or ethnicity. Jesus works through *us* now to raise all of God's children into the freedom they deserve.