

*Sermon*  
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This is the third  
Sabbath controversy  
in our gospel.  
By now we've come  
to expect that Jesus  
has a new vision of Sabbath keeping  
and a different priority  
than the status quo of his times.

Of course, the status quo  
was enforced by the Pharisees.  
Jesus clashes with them repeatedly,  
usually over following the rules.  
In today's gospel, for instance,  
the question of work  
on the Sabbath is raised.

You see, Genesis,  
in the Old Testament  
urges Israel to rest from all work  
because God declared  
a day of rest in creation.

Over time, as the people of Israel  
tried to follow God's will  
over many generations,  
many interpretations and rules  
were created so that the faithful  
could be certain of living  
in accordance with God's law.

For instance, one could not work  
On the Sabbath,  
But one could release livestock  
to allow them  
to feed and drink.  
There were many such exceptions  
created over the centuries to  
allow pious living and practical discipline.

Jesus, on the other hand,  
seems to be following  
a different priority  
from the Old Testament,  
probably Deuteronomy.

In Deuteronomy,  
the faithful are charged with  
observing the Sabbath  
by undertaking a holy work.

Jesus work is always holy.  
And of course, we know  
that Jesus always places  
human needs over human rules.

We would be surprised indeed, if Jesus,  
teaching at the synagogue,  
saw the crippled woman and said,  
“Sister, I see your need  
and know your heartfelt  
desire for release.  
But rules are rules,  
And my critics are watching,  
so if I’m still in town  
later this week,  
I’ll see what I can do.”

On the Sabbath, it seems,  
only scheduled miracles  
are tolerated,  
no exceptions allowed.

But Jesus is not your typical rabbi.  
He is not just a deeply faithful  
and learned priestly leader.  
He is more.  
He is the son of God.  
He is, in fact  
the kingdom of God incarnate.

And so, of course He sees her  
and of course, he must heal her.  
He must.

She is a daughter of Israel,

a child of God's promise  
and Jesus knows  
that he can set her free.

Let's consider this woman  
for a moment.  
She is not seeking cure  
from Jesus and there are none  
who advocate on her behalf.

She is a faithful woman,  
one who has lived her life  
bent double for 18 years or more.

What this meant for her  
was that for her adult life  
she has been scorned and secluded.  
Illness was seen as the result  
of sin and the presence of Satan.  
She had gone about her life  
unable to look up,  
unable to look forward  
with any comfort.  
She was breaking under  
the burden of her own body  
and was unable to free herself  
or imagine a different future.

In some ways, she is much like us.  
Our bodies may not betray our burden,  
but many of us,  
at least once in our life,  
are crushed by the weight  
of this world and the events of our own lives.

We struggle to walk forward,  
unable to see ahead,  
unable to hold our heads up high,  
unable sometimes,  
even to gaze upward  
in supplication to our God.

In these times, again,  
it is Jesus who can set us free  
by his very presence.  
And he wants to.

Jesus always desires  
our wholeness, our health.  
Even on the Sabbath.

Jesus is the lord of the Sabbath,  
and so he sees the woman,  
lays hands on her  
and she is healed.

Now in other times and places  
in this gospel we have seen Jesus  
heal by command.

He speaks a word  
to the man with the withered hand  
and he is healed.  
He speaks a word to the woman  
who touches his cloak,  
and she too is healed.

But in this Sabbath story,  
Jesus speaks yes,  
but then touches the woman,  
who is considered unclean  
thereby restoring her health  
and her social status  
at the same time.

Jesus does not fear  
the culture's opinion of his deeds.  
He does not fear  
contamination by any of the marginalized  
he has come to restore.

He even cites the Pharisees rule  
allowing the care of livestock  
to ask the leaders,  
“is not this woman,  
a daughter of Israel,  
more important than  
a beast of the field?”

He touches, comforts,  
cares for, dies for  
all those who have been  
burdened by the weights

of this world.

And he brings with him  
a new vision  
of relationship with God,  
one based on love,  
respect and mercy.

His coming,  
his kingdom keeping,  
takes the impossible laws  
constructed by the  
well-meaning faithful  
and abolishes them  
by fulfilling them  
once and for all.

Ronald Byars reminds us  
that where Jesus is,  
the kingdom is.  
“Where Jesus is,  
things begin  
to be made right.

His ministry provides  
a foretaste of the coming kingdom.  
In the reign of God,  
the world will be repaired.

There will be  
no blindness  
or loss of hearing,  
no one broken or disfigured.

In the reign of God,  
there will be  
no conflicts between  
what is good for one  
and what is good for all.”

And he leaves us  
with this question.

“If this is  
the ultimate future  
God is preparing for us,

how might we  
contribute to some  
manifestation of it  
wherever we find ourselves?"

Let us pray:

O God, mighty and immortal, you know that as fragile creatures surrounded by great dangers, we cannot by ourselves stand upright. Give us strength of mind and body, so that even when we suffer because of human sin or the random brokenness of the world, we may rise victorious through your son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. (Sundays and Seasons prayer for Lectionary 21)