

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

KEEPING THE SABBATH HOLY

Luke 13:10-17

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16)

Analysis by Carolyn Schneider

10Now [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. 11And 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. 12When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." 13When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 14But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day." 15But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? 16And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" 17When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

DIAGNOSIS: Unrest on the Sabbath

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Jesus Provokes a Crisis in the Congregation*

On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus is creating confrontations everywhere he goes. He is being provocative, and a big crowd always gathers to see what will happen. Luke invites us to join the crowd in a synagogue. Jesus has come to preach, but, true to form, while there he initiates a crisis. Scanning the crowd, Jesus picks out a woman bent over and unable to stand up straight. Luke draws our attention to her as Jesus calls her up front, lays his hands on her, and does the work of healing. Immediately there is a hubbub because it is the Sabbath and everyone knows the commandment, "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..." (Exodus 20:8-10a; see also Deuteronomy 5:12-14a) . A showdown erupts between the leader of the synagogue and his invited guest preacher who is shaking the congregation.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Should We Obey God's Sabbath Commandment or Not?*

It is, after all, God who gave the command not to work on the Sabbath. Jesus is challenging the way we think about God. We know that God is the lawgiver who has told us what to do in order to maintain good relations with God and good relations with each other. We ought to do what God commands. After all, as the synagogue leader says, it is not as if God completely prohibits work, certainly not healing, but there are six days of the week on which to do it. Why deliberately break the commandment? But Jesus breaks it. He troubles us. Does that mean that everyone can just do whatever they want? Who wants to go to worship with the congregation and experience conflict and moral chaos instead of piety, obedience, and devotion?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Jesus calls us hypocrites.*

Jesus calls us hypocrites because we do break the commandments to save ourselves or even to protect our property. “Don’t you untie your animals and lead them to water on the Sabbath?” Jesus asks his hearers. Responsible, humane behavior, yes, but also a breach of the commandment. If we think that obedience to God’s commandments is going to save us, then we will remain bound by the commandments, and our bondage will keep others bound, too, not only the animals but also the beloved daughter of Abraham, bent over for 18 years. Our enslavement to the law may actually obstruct the salvation of the world, a sin worse than any disobedience. God will not tolerate that.

PROGNOSIS: Rest on the Sabbath

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Jesus Frees Us from Our Bondage*

God will endure being called a troublemaker, a lawbreaker, and a blasphemer in order to release us from our bonds as Jesus works publicly there in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, where even the threat of a public execution does not deter him. And executed he is, lying in the tomb on the Sabbath, bound in linen wrappings and death, the bondage of our sin. God keeps the Sabbath that day in order to share with us to the end the consequences of our sin. But on Sunday, God pulls us through, as in the resurrection of Jesus we are untied, unwrapped, and let loose. So that we might maintain the freedom of the risen Jesus, Jesus shares with us the Holy Spirit, by whom he draws people, like the bent-over woman, to himself for healing.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *We Get to Experience the Sabbath*

There is a sense in which God always heals on the Sabbath

because everyone who experiences release from whatever bondage they are in find relief and a longed-for day of rest, a Sabbath. The one person in the crowd at the synagogue who actually keeps the Sabbath commandment is the straightened-up woman. After being freed, she praises God for the wonderful work God has done for her. She keeps the Sabbath holy, remembering that, like the slaves in Egypt, she had been in bondage and the Lord had rescued her “with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm” (Deuteronomy 5:15), laid upon her head by Jesus. Is it not the purpose of the Sabbath commandment to recall regularly that all our life comes from God, not from any other person, and not even from our own work?

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *The Holy Spirit Provokes Joy in the Congregation*

It was the Holy Spirit who agitated the congregation in a flurry of activity in the synagogue that day. She caused the crowd to rejoice that Jesus had overcome the obstacles to their healing and salvation. Luke has given us Jesus’ eyes to look through so that we, too, can scan the crowd, spot the ones stooping, and provoke the issue of what we might be thinking or doing that would block Jesus’ hands from touching and healing. The conflict that results inside and among us might just lead to some glorious work at the hands of Jesus and to Sabbath joy for the entire crowd.