

# Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

## Two Kinds of Sabbath Theologies: One Demands, One Offers

Luke 13:10-17

## Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16) Analysis by Steven Kuhl

Now [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 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." 15 But 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.

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## DIAGNOSIS: Sabbath (Rest) as a Binding Requirement

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *Bound to Sabbath*

## *Obligations*

We don't know much about the woman who suddenly "appeared" in the synagogue on that Sabbath day when Jesus happened to be teaching there (v. 11). But, then, do we really know much about any of the women (and men) who appear in our worship spaces? What we know is what we see. Here is a woman bound by this life's "ailments": "crippled, "bent over," with eighteen years of evidence of no hope of cure (v. 11). Most notable, too, is the fact that there is no praise of God on her lips. How tired and restless she must be. Yet, she dutifully "appears" at the synagogue, fulfilling the sabbath obligation. Why?

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Ailment of Spirit: Her Sabbath Is Bound by the Law**

This woman, as Luke diagnoses her, has more than the spirit of an ailment, that is, a "spirit that has crippled her" physically (v. 11). Even more, she has an ailment of spirit, linked to the sabbath theology she hears. The word she hears from her regular preacher, the synagogue leader, is that she owes God. Specifically, on this Sabbath day, she hears the "indignation" of her preacher against Jesus as a chastisement of her. "Don't believe Jesus works for God. God offers no cure, no relief, no sabbath rest for the likes of you" (v. 14). Indeed, sabbath, says this preacher, is a demand of God to be observed: that we praise God by honoring the fact that on that one day of the week God does nothing (v. 14). But that is something she is "quite unable" to do. She can no more give praise to this God than she can "stand up straight" in the body (v. 11). Far from helping her ailing spirit, the word of demand she hears from her regular preacher binds her all the more in the ailment of her spirit. In a word, it renders her faithless.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Put to Shame: Bound to Satan**

As Jesus diagnoses this woman's present state even further, he

exposes it as being most desperate. She may have been physically born into Israel, the people of Abraham, but for these past eighteen years she has been bound in spirit to Satan (v. 16). That is the deepest meaning of her praise-less, faithless state. And unless she is released from the chains of that bondage she is doomed. Note closely what being bound to Satan means in this circumstance. It does not mean doing obviously evil kinds of deeds. To the contrary, she has no physical ability to do such deeds. To be bound to Satan, whose name literally translated from the Greek means “accuser,” means to be hopelessly under the burden of God’s demand to the point of being “put to shame” (v. 17).

## **PROGNOSIS: Sabbath (Rest) as a Freeing Offer**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *Freedom through the Shame of the Cross*

The good news for this woman happened not primarily because she “appeared” in the synagogue on the sabbath (i.e., the fulfillment of a demand), but because Jesus showed up (i.e., the arrival of help). The advent of her hope is revealed in the cross words Jesus has with the synagogue leader. The leader is “indignant” at Jesus’ teaching/healing and chastises Jesus with a sabbath theology that is held captive to the law. The law is clear he claims: we are to do nothing on the sabbath because God does nothing on the sabbath – and that, the leader says, is praiseworthy. Jesus, in healing this woman, is therefore a sabbath breaker, not a sabbath keeper. To this kind of sabbath theology Jesus says, “You hypocrite!” Even you, synagogue leader, “untie” the bonds of your ox or donkey to cure its hunger and thirst on the sabbath (v. 15). Sabbath, says Jesus, isn’t about God’s law and demands, although God’s demands abound in God’s work of creation and make us weary. Sabbath, on the contrary, is about God’s release, help, cure – gospel! The Scripture that says God “rested” on the seventh day does not

mean that he did nothing, but that he promises to create rest for the weary – and not only for physical weariness, but for the weariness of spirit that comes from the demand of the law and the shame it exposes day after day in our life. Jesus “appears” precisely to fulfill the biblical promise of rest/sabbath. This he does by bearing the shame of that woman (and us all) on the cross and by breaking the bonds of Satan, the accuser with resurrection hope.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Rejoicing in Spirit: Her Sabbath Is Released in Christ.**

What the demands of the law could not do, the free offer of Christ does: namely, elicit true faith in God. The evidence of this transformation is the spontaneous praise of God on the lips of the woman (v. 13) and the unsolicited rejoicing that swept over the entire crowd (v. 17) when Jesus defeated the sabbath theology of synagogue leader – a foreshadowing of his Easter Victory. In the encounter with Christ this woman was healed not only of her physical ailment, but also of her ailing spirit. In a word, she abounded in faith, faith that God has come in Christ to establish true rest, true sabbath, for the weary. Perhaps for the first time in her life (we know that it had been at least for eighteen years) she had heard of the sabbath as an offer of God’s help and not a demand.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Abounding in Paschal Observance: The New Sabbath**

Although the text is silent about what happened to this woman after her transforming encounter with Jesus, nevertheless, with Luke’s second volume (the Acts of the Apostles) as our pattern, we can be sure that she still went to synagogue and still observed the sabbath. To be sure she would do so inspired by a new sabbath theology: one grounded in God’s offer as opposed to God’s demand; one observed on a new day of the week, the first day of the week in remembrance of the resurrection; and one

heaven bent on singing a new hymn of praise, praising Jesus. As the years would pass, she probably got new ailments. She may have become bent over all over again. But what would not be returning is her ailing spirit. For from now on her preacher would always preach the offer of Christ and celebrate the meal of mercy rooted in the Paschal observance, the offer that says given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.