

August 22, 2010  
Luke 13:10-17  
*A Day For Compassion*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

It's Sunday morning. Just a little while ago, alarms sounded, and sleepy Christians rose from slumber, showered ... maybe ..., brewed, poured and drank some coffee. Then they made their way ... not to work, not to play, but to an assembly like ours here.

God and only God knows why any individual Christian gathers for worship each week, but the simple fact that we do sends a message to this world around us, a message this world and its people need to here: We don't have to work all the time. We can trust God's care, God's love. We were created for so much more than lives of work and play, producing and consuming. We tell the world that this is God's creation, and we are God's people so we can afford to rest; and ... what's more we can work so that others can rest, too.

The story of God, God's creation and God's people includes from the beginning the time God takes to be present in and with God's creatures in a time set aside to just be, a holy time to rest in each other's presence – a Sabbath. We are commanded to rest in God. God wants us to stop our work and our play (which in itself is just another form of work) so that we have the time to be together in God's presence. It's this time set apart from the ordinary demands of life that we are to keep, to guard, value, and protect.

That we keep Sabbath makes us different from the go-go-go world around us. It's a gift of God's grace and part of the liberating good news of God's kingdom we have for our benefit and to share with every man, woman and child we meet. Because God knows, we could all use a good rest ... not to mention a spiritual renewal.

But I wonder what would happen, if they started to come? What would happen to us and to this assembly if they – those who were stressed, burdened, put upon, burned out, tired, broken – everyone in need of rest actually came in the hundreds and thousands to find the relief they need, they want ... and that God promises to give.

Imagine the chaos, the confusion, the disruption of worship, the strain on our patience and resources, the trouble we'd have with the town – the traffic, the parking, the building occupancy. Fill this place with needy people, carrying a lot of baggage ... it would be noisy and hot. Maybe we wouldn't have a seat. Maybe we'd have to sit up front. If people knew that the rest they need and deserve and that God wants them to have could be found right here ... because Jesus is here ... well, our worship wouldn't be the same.

That's the peculiar position of the leader of the synagogue finds when Jesus comes to town and gathers with God's people to keep Sabbath. Things were going along alright ... people gathered, scriptures read, Jesus teaching, commenting. Then a stooped over woman appeared and things got weird. In the middle of his teaching, Jesus goes over to the crippled woman. He touches her. She stands up straight and starts praising God.

Now, it's this leader's job to make sure that the assembly of God's people on the Sabbath proceeds in good order, according the time-honored traditions that have served

to keep God's people together as a witnessing community for years, for centuries, even. For him and for his people, it's more than just going to synagogue, it's keeping and guarding and protecting and preserving this holy time with God, as God's people. It's what makes them different. A devout, faithful and responsible leader does not, cannot, let Jesus do what Jesus just did: There's a time to heal, a time to work at caring and ministering, and there is a time to keep Sabbath, to rest, to refrain, to hear and discuss scripture, to live in faith ... without work. So, he scolds the gathered crowd, putting them on notice that synagogue has a different purpose. Come to seek God, he says, not your own health and well being. After all it's not fair to Jesus ... to expect him to work, serving you, healing, caring. If they want to come, then come and worship.

It's an awkward position to be in ... wishing Jesus wasn't there so things could go on in familiar, traditional way ... wishing fewer people had come so that we could worship in peace, quiet and comfort.

But speaking of awkward positions. That poor woman. Eighteen years under the weight of some burden, weak, stooped over. She didn't interrupt, didn't make a scene. She was just there, bent over and weak. Jesus found her. Jesus touched her. Jesus healed her. Jesus straightened her back, gave her strength so she could pray, praise and thank God – whose child she was. When you think about it, that woman's story is really the story of God's people: Oppressed, burdened, enslaved. God hears their cry, sets them free from their burden, strengthens them and puts them in the proper posture for prayer, praise and thanksgiving. God set them free from 24-7-365 slavery. Sets them free to worship and praise. Wouldn't setting a person free be the ultimate Sabbath-keeping action and a wonderful teaching moment.

And that's Jesus' point. Anyone would take the burden off their donkey or ox and give them water on Sabbath -- in fact, lifting that burden is part of God's Sabbath commandments so that the livestock can rest, and slaves and servants, and even foreigners. So, it is no work at all for God to set us free from the spirit of this age that so weakens us, burdens us, cripples us. Not work at all, grace, love and mercy and a joyful welcome in the Sabbath rest God guards so carefully.

That's why this Sabbath thing is so important. The church isn't the building that's under construction now. The church isn't the traditions of our fathers and mothers developed to bring good order to our worship and service of God. The church is God's holy people, gathered in God's holy presence ... a holy space where Jesus is alive and active and present ... forgiving, reconciling, healing, liberating, setting free. We come with our burdens and leave singing God's praises. It's a day of freedom, a day of compassion, a day when Jesus rose from the dead freeing us for life forever under God's reign.

Honor the Sabbath to keep it a special day, a holy day to God. We aren't slaves, we're free to rest in God's presence, enjoy God's creation in faith and love. On this day, Christ overcame death and the grave. We are free. That's what this day is about, but it's more than a day of rest, it's a day for compassion. And what's more compassionate for this 24-7-365 working, playing, producing, consuming and almost burned out world and its people, than this word from Jesus: "You are free! Take a break. Come, keep Sabbath with us. In Jesus name, rest. Amen."