

Pent 13, Proper 16, Yr C
 August 22, 2010
 All Saints Episcopal Church

Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

In the name of the One God who forgives, heals and redeems. AMEN.

Good morning! Just before I started to work here at All Saints full time – a little over 3 ½ years ago - I had been working at Providence Hospital for 8 years. Every morning I drove out Airport Blvd – over 50 traffic lights from Daphne, where I lived at the beginning - and every day I passed various intersections where young men, old men, sometimes women, sold newspapers to the people whose cars were stopped for a red light. They walked up and down between the lanes of cars, waving their papers in the air, somehow seeing the signs drivers made to indicate that they wanted to buy one, and changing from lane to lane somehow just in time to get to the safety of the median when the light turned green and traffic started to move again.

At the corner of Airport and McGregor or Azalea, depending on which way you were going, was a different paper man. He was different from the rest because he was bent over at the waist, completely unable to stand up straight, his legs also bent so that he was sort of “Z-shaped” ... his head turned slightly to one side, looking out of only the eye on that side of his head. He kept the papers in one arm and his other arm swung back and forth as if that movement helped propel him down the lane of cars. When he came to a stop at a car window, his face was level with the door handle. I would guess that many of you saw him there, too.

I worried about him a lot. Where did he live. How did he get there in the morning, and how did he get home at night. Was it safe for him to be out there – you know how people drive in Mobile. Did people make fun of him. Were they abusive to him. Did he have anyone who was his friend. Was he in any pain. When he went to bed at night, did he really get to rest, or did his condition keep him from ever being comfortable. I never asked him any of those questions. I never said anything to him. I’m sorry that I didn’t do anything.

I know you’ve heard the term ‘bent out of shape.’ Usually, it means a person is unbelievably angry about something, or quite unforgiving about some wrong -- whether real or imagined. It’s the person’s mind, or heart, or soul that is “out of shape” – bent, as it were, under the weight of the anger, the fury, the feeling of being wronged. But it’s also possible that we can be bent out of shape literally – like the paper man on Airport blvd; or illnesses that prevent us from looking and acting like everyone else; even mental conditions that distort our bodies as well as our minds.

Such is the case with the woman in our Gospel story this morning. She has been crippled by a spirit for 18 years – roughly half the expected lifespan of someone in those days – and she has come to the synagogue to worship. What happens is unexpected and unimagined by this woman. Jesus happens to be teaching in the synagogue. He looks up and notices this bent-out-of-shape woman. He calls her over to him, speaks to her and lays his hands on her. After this amazing succession of events, she immediately stands up straight and begins praising God!

Now let’s think about this woman. She had been bent over for **18 years**. She was – as Jim described Mary the mother of Jesus last week – a woman of no account – she was a woman who was lower than a slave – property -- a woman rendered constantly unclean by the spirit that had weighed her down, nameless except to be known as “the cripple” or “the bent over woman”.

How did she function? How was she able to care for her children? How could she do the daily chores? How could she get dressed in the morning? Or talk to her neighbors? Or sit down at the table to eat?

Yet she had come to the synagogue to worship God.

But the synagogue was not a friendly place for her. After all, she was a woman of no account. It was men who formed a congregation; women were kept separate, unable to participate as the men did. But she came anyway.

She just wanted to say her prayers because it was the Sabbath. She was not looking to call attention to herself. She did not approach Jesus to ask him for help.

But Jesus, as we know, was not your ordinary guy in the synagogue.

First of all, Jesus was teaching the others – something he was often asked to do. And instead of overlooking the woman, instead of ignoring her, instead of rambling on with his lesson as if she didn't even exist, Jesus did something different. He stopped what he was doing and called her over to him. He drew attention to this nameless woman of no account, naming her 'daughter of Abraham' and he touched her. He bent a couple of rules when he did those things, but nothing as bad as what happened next: he healed her...on the Sabbath.

He flat out broke that rule, and the synagogue leader became, as you might say, totally bent out of shape over it! The Torah laid down a no-work rule on the Sabbath, and everyone knew it. In the leader's view, Jesus' disregard of that rule showed extreme disrespect for God and the leader couldn't let it slip by unnoticed. But instead of taking Jesus off to the side to talk to him in private, he turned to the crowd in the synagogue and began to talk to them: "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day."

The leader was right, technically. Jesus **could** have waited a few hours. He **could** have healed the woman after sunset, and then he wouldn't have violated the Sabbath. Then he would be honoring God AND healing this woman. She'd been this way for 18 years, after all. It wasn't like it was an emergency or anything.

But the synagogue leader didn't tell Jesus not to heal on the Sabbath. Instead, he told the crowd not to come for healing on the Sabbath. He knew he couldn't control Jesus, but he could control these people. They had to live with him day after day. He was the man in charge -- and they knew it.

But Jesus wasn't about to give this man the last word. The man had not criticized him directly, but Jesus answered him directly -- answered him and those who thought like him. "You hypocrites," he said, "Don't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or your donkey and lead it away to give it water? If you are so concerned about those animals, shouldn't this woman, a **daughter of Abraham**, who has been bound for eighteen long years, be set free (the same root word in Greek as 'untied') from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" The holiness of the Sabbath, while very important, does not trump the need for compassion for one's neighbor.

The woman set free from her ailment praises God while the synagogue ruler standing up straight is actually quite bent over by the rules and regulations he is so keen on keeping. This daughter of Abraham knew her need and for eighteen years had suffered the stares and whispers of those whose religious perspective put the blame squarely on her shoulders. You know: bad things

happen to bad people. This son of Abraham holding a position of prestige and power had no idea that the very things he held as holy prevented him from doing the one thing that would make him holy.

God said it this way more than once, "I desire mercy not sacrifice."

If the Sabbath is meant to return us to the place of rest modeled by the Creator on the seventh day, then the Sabbath is meant to reconnect us to the God who commanded that rest be observed.

Jesus said it this way more than once, "The Sabbath was meant for you. Not you for the Sabbath." So the Sabbath that reconnects us to the One who commanded it begins with an attitude and not an action, or in this case lack of action. Reconnecting to God is an attitude of care and concern for all of creation -- beasts of burdens and daughters and sons of Abraham -- and everyone else for that matter -- which leads one to actions that bring healing and peace and justice seven days a week. Or in other words: Sabbath sacrificed for mercy praises God while mercy sacrificed for Sabbath is no rest at all.

So this week it might do us some good to begin in a moment of sabbath, to start from a quiet place within, and meet with God's compassion the gaze of someone who is suffering -- someone at school or work, someone on the street, someone in our memory -- and to remind ourselves of the dignity, the freedom, the blessing that is God's desire for this person as God's child.

We may be moved to act. And wouldn't that be just what we are called to do? "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with you God."

Thanks be to God! Amen.