

Sermon for August 21, 2022

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Appointed texts:

- Hebrew Scriptures: Jeremiah 1:4-10
- Gospel: Luke 13: 10-17

“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, not on the sabbath day.” But the Beloved answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie your ox or your donkey from the manger, and lead to away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for 18 long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”

God invented the sabbath. “On the seventh day, he rested from all the work that he had done. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.”

Whether you read Genesis 1 as a metaphor or as literal seven-day truth, God’s first gift to humanity is REST. Before we humans do any kind of useful work on this newly created planet, God gives us rest. God gives us rest as the necessary basis for all the other things we’re going to do in life. It’s what we need to have FIRST before we can even be capable of anything else.

Like everything that happens in our relationship with God, we also get this gift of rest totally undeservedly. Humanity hasn’t done a single useful or good thing by the time that seventh day rolls around in Genesis. We

haven't come up with names like buffalo or caterpillar or orangutan. We haven't tended the garden. Honestly, we're just a couple of verses away from doing what we've been told not to for the very first time. All we've accomplished so far in the story is that we've been created in the image of God... and God's next act is to give us a pattern of rest... Literally the first thing God gives us is stillness... a time to rest with God. How good is THAT?

This kind of holy rest is more subtle than just taking a break from all the doing and striving and busyness that we cram into our days. This kind of holy rest isn't even, necessarily, rushing to church and doing all the right sorts of things on Sundays. Remember, in that depiction of the very first seventh day, all there is is God resting, humans resting, and the splendour of the newly created world. That is some cosmic, abiding rest in which we really know ourselves to be beloved of God, crafted in the divine image and likeness. That is kind of contemplative, unifying rest that Julian of Norwich had in mind when she wrote in the 14th century:

For He is the Very Rest.
God wishes to be known,
And it pleases Him that we rest in Him;
For all that is beneath Him will never satisfy us.
Therefore no soul is rested til it is emptied of all things that are made.
When, for love of Him, it is emptied, the soul can receive its deep rest.

Since childhood, I've always had the same mental picture of that first sabbath. Maybe it comes from some faint recollection of words heard in

Sunday School. Maybe I blended that with memories of family road trips and picnics. Because I have always imagined those first created people lying on a red plaid picnic blanket at the edge of an orchard, eyes closed, just resting. The warm sun is on their shoulders, and they're contented, probably a little mystified by this new world all around them, but they are peaceful and simply resting in the overwhelming everywhere-presence of God. There's a gentle buzz of bees who have just discovered flowers. There's the scent of apple blossoms and the sound of birds tentatively trying out their songs for the first time. There is safety and infinite goodness. They are whole and they are with God. And that is all there is.

Because resting and wholeness go together, hand in hand. We cannot have one without the other.

So perhaps it's not surprising that Jesus healed on the sabbath, this day that was always intended to ground us in God and to restore us to knowledge of our wholeness and remind us who we really are. This day on which all there was that first time was God and us, made in divine likeness, utterly aware of our interconnectedness.

But friends, we added rules. Rules about the sabbath. Because, we *love* making rules. Rules help rule-makers feel in control. Rules help rule-followers feel safe and secure. And so we got rules about how to rest. Where to rest. What day is the seventh. What to do. What not to do. And Jesus tells this religious leader that he's not disobeying the rules of the sabbath: he's interpreting them more deeply. Jesus is focusing on God's original intent that a time of rest is meant to restore us always to

wholeness, and he's teaching us that compassion for others will always, always outweigh any human-made rules. Jesus is teaching both us and the crowd in that synagogue that God's true law is not fundamentally a law of prohibitions and limitations. God's law is always intended to liberate and to bring God's children back into wholeness and to reconciled relationship with our Divine Creator.

The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible captions this story as something like "Jesus Heals the Crippled Woman" but I like the title of this story in Victorian-era bibles better: "Jesus Heals a Woman with a Spirit of Infirmary".

THAT is a great phrase: a spirit of infirmity... Certainly, this woman is described as physically bent-over, but her malady is also described as demonic, satanic, which is usually language that hints at something more in the psychological, emotional, even spiritual realm that people in the First Century Middle East just didn't have other language for. So this is not just a story about making a woman with scoliosis stand up straight. And that opens up this story, because there are so many ways that the emotional weight and troubles of the past can truly cripple us and keep us bent over in spirit. There are so many ways where psychological hurt or harm in our spiritual life can keep us from really moving ahead, eyes forward, seeing the world as it really is. These are things that can bend us in upon ourselves. And in this woman's case, for 18 years. Eighteen years! This is a story for everyone who has ever felt locked in place by grief or self-doubt or remorse. Anyone who has felt locked in place by depression or an unhealthy nostalgia that ties them to places and things, as if frozen.

Anyone who has come up against addiction or trauma. Everyone who has ever been locked in place by sin.

It's worth noting what Jesus does in this story and what it offers us as a model... and as a hope:

- Jesus immediately sees what is hurting and he goes there. He makes a beeline. Jesus' priority is always those who are hurting and, in this case, in bringing this woman back to the image and likeness of God in which she was created.
- Second, Jesus has no hesitation at all about standing up to a status quo that justifies suffering. Like the prophets, like Jeremiah, he speaks truth to power and isn't afraid of confronting those who use their authority or privilege to keep others living lives of limitation.
- And third, he offers healing – offers that restoration to wholeness – and he does so unconditionally. The woman in the story doesn't come to him pleading. She's not asking. And she hasn't done anything to deserve his attention or the gift of his healing. She's just there and she's hurting. Christ is ready and willing, with the full outpouring of God's compassion and healing before she can even get the words together to ask for it. Before she even thinks to ask. Because that, thanks be, is how our God and our salvation works.

I wonder...

- where is Jesus noticing what hurts in you and is offering his healing?

I wonder...

- what are the wounded places and people around you in the world that he is moving to care for?

And I wonder...

- how might you join Jesus in that work of restoration, from a prayerful place of deep rest? Rest that you really, really need and almost certainly aren't giving yourself. Rest that Christ himself urges us to take in Mark's gospel, saying "Come with me to a quiet place, and rest awhile."

For a run of years, I used to take myself on retreat with some regularity to the Trappist Abbey of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the Willamette Valley in Oregon -- to give myself some contemplative time and to live in the monastic rhythm. And I'd always arrive with a well thought out, ambitious plan for the spiritual work that I was going to do on my week there. I'd have a spiritual book that I planned to read and long walks that I planned to take and daily journal writing and meditating and saying the Daily Office at all hours of the day and night with the monks. And every time... every time... you know what I ended up doing? Sleeping. I'd arrive and sleep for days with only breaks for meals and sometimes prayers. Because REST was the spiritual work that I needed to do: I needed to restore myself in absolute rest, TOTAL SABBATH, before I could attend to anything else that might be healing or restorative on my spiritual agenda.

I was relieved when the Guest Brother assured me that I wasn't the only one. The monks see it over and over again. Guests who don't really emerge until day 3 or 4, because the ministry that they need most of all is rest. Having fallen out of the practice -- indeed, the commandment -- of sabbathing, guests arrive and suck up sleep like a thirsty traveller slurps up

water after crossing a desert. And only when the thirst for real rest had been satisfied can guests even begin the spiritual work of listening for God's voice in the stillness.

What kind of spiritual practices of rest – *real* sabbathing – might be calling to you to help deepen your walk in the Way of Jesus? I guarantee you that they aren't rule-bound practices. They're probably not prayer practices where you recite words at God. They're almost certainly contemplative. They require regular physical rest first. And they're practices that involve being still, being restful with God, eliminating distractions, and listening...

They're practices that sound an awful lot like the poem "Today" by Mary Oliver in her collection A Thousand Mornings. Let's close with her words and recommit ourselves to God's intended pattern of rest for us so that we can listen in that rest to how He is speaking to us – calling us back to wholeness:

Today I'm flying low and I'm
not saying a word.
I'm letting all the voodoo of ambition
sleep.

The world goes on as it must,
the bees in the garden rumbling a little,
the fish leaping, the gnats getting eaten.
And so forth.

But I'm taking the day off.
Quiet as a feather.
I hardly move though really I'm traveling
a terrific distance.

Stillness. One of the doors into the temple.