

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost  
Proper 16  
Year C

Isaiah 58:9b-14  
Psalm 103:1-8  
Hebrews 12:18-29  
Luke 13:10-17

There are many competing story lines in this reading from Luke's Gospel. Most important is the observance of the Sabbath. The leader of the synagogue, who is frequently cast as the bad guy, feels that it is his role to enforce the prevailing interpretation that the Sabbath is a day of rest, looking back to the Genesis story. He is, after all, a middle manager interpreting the rules laid down by his superiors. While emergency actions are allowable, routine healing can be performed any other day of the week, but the Sabbath should be maintained as a day when one refrains from all work.

Jesus presents the other side of the discussion on the Sabbath observance from Deuteronomy - that good deeds are acceptable on the Sabbath. For Jesus, one needs to look at the Sabbath as a celebration of the liberation of the Israelites from captivity in Egypt. This liberation must extend to all Israelites, especially women.

This leads us to a discussion of the actual healing that takes place. Jesus is in the synagogue on the Sabbath, as was His practice. A woman who had been crippled for many years appears. She is described as being bent over, unable to stand up straight. Jesus called her; she had not asked for anything but was merely present. When she joined Him, Jesus told her that she was set free from her ailment. Then Jesus laid His hands on her and she stood up straight. Needless to say, after having been forced to look at nothing but the ground in front of her all those years, this woman praised God for her healing.

The conflict with the leader of the synagogue revolved around the two interpretations of the Sabbath traditions mentioned above. The Pharisees held that no work was to be done on the Sabbath, yet one could lead livestock to water if it was not carrying any burdens. Since the leader of the synagogue was under the instruction of the Pharisees, this was his interpretation. Jesus, on the other hand, using the reading from Deuteronomy as His guide, looked not at the finite details of the reading from Genesis, but in the need for all of Abraham's descendants to be free. Thus, He compares the Pharisees' exception for livestock to the needs of the children of Abraham. This is a typical process of argument used by the rabbis - using a lesser example to show the point of a greater need.

While we might agree that honoring the Sabbath is a good thing, and people frequently ask me if I take a day of Sabbath rest for myself, we would do well to follow the example of Jesus in our interpretation of Sabbath practice. In His ministry, Jesus was focused on the marginalized - those who were excluded from society. Be it women, lepers, or anyone suffering from a society-shunned condition, Jesus was always reaching out to them. In that culture, most of the interactions Jesus had were considered to make Him spiritually unclean. That was never a

consideration for Him. The only consideration Jesus entertained was the need presented to Him, like the woman in this reading. Should a doctor perform surgeries on Sunday (or on the Sabbath)? Jesus would say yes. In everything we do, our focus should be on helping those in need, no matter what day of the week it is.

St. Paul would argue that we are no longer bound by the Law of Moses, so our observance of the Sabbath need not follow the interpretations of the Pharisees. However, it is good to spend some time during the week, be it Sunday afternoon or any other time that works for you, to have that quiet time - to spend time conversing with the family and reading the Bible. The point of the Sabbath, at least in my understanding, is to set some specific time aside from our busy lives to focus on God. In the creation story in Genesis, God rested on the seventh. We need to take some time for rest ourselves and, spending that time focused on the things God has done for us is a fruitful way for us to rest. But we should never let our rest be an excuse for not helping others, especially those on the margins.