

Freedom on the Sabbath

**A sermon by Carolyn Herring
Presented on Sunday, September 26, 2010**

Sermon Prayer:

Please pray with me. Gracious God, open our eyes, our ears and our hearts. Speak to us this morning in the prayers, in the music, in the sermon and the scriptures, and the fellowship with one another. And may we be doers of the Word and not only hearers. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Sermon:

The Sabbath is here. "Good Sabbath to you," as the pilgrims used to say to one another. The Sabbath for the people of Israel was originally on Saturday, at the end of the week, and when the church was very young and still mostly Jewish the Sabbath was kept on Saturday, but early on the day of worship for us Christians was switched to Sunday since that was the day Jesus was raised from the dead. But it's still considered the Sabbath for us.

The gospels record many Sabbath days that Jesus spent teaching in the synagogue. Today's gospel lesson from Luke is one of them. It was his custom, according to Luke. Just like, after the work week is past we spend our Sunday in church, to worship, hear the scriptures read, and to be together in the presence of God, Jesus, as a faithful Jew, and a rabbi, spent his Sabbaths teaching in the synagogue, which often led him into conflict with the synagogue elders. You remember in another passage from Luke's Gospel, he tells us of when Jesus goes to his home town Nazareth and reads from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." When he read that, at first everyone was amazed, but

when they figured out what he was really saying, it made them so angry they wanted to throw him off the cliff. Another time he was in the synagogue and a man with a withered hand approached him and, although Jesus knew the Pharisees and other religious leaders were watching him and waiting to trip him up somehow, he healed the man's hand, and for some reason, this also enraged them. So his presence in the synagogue on the Sabbath often got him into trouble and today will be no exception. This is the story of Jesus and the bent-over woman.

As he's teaching on this particular Sabbath day, there appears in the congregation a woman, bent over and crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. Luke doesn't tell us much about her, not even her name. We don't know if it was her custom to come to the synagogue every Sabbath like Jesus did, or if this was her first time in church. We don't know if she was there alone, a widow or a single woman, or if she was a mother with young children in tow. We don't know if she came faithfully each week to be healed, never giving up hope, believing every time she came, absolutely sure this time will be THE time, that today the God of her father Abraham would hear her prayer, and be gracious, and in his mercy set her free. Or if she left the synagogue each week with the consolation, "Well, if not this Sabbath, then surely the next."

We don't know if she awoke every morning, railing against God and religion, and shaking her fist at the life that had twisted her into a question mark, leaving her with no answers, and no end in sight. Or if on this day she sat quietly in the back of the synagogue with the other women, in stony silence, her spirit no longer just crippled, but broken in two.

We don't really know any of these things about her. We only know, as Jesus says, that eighteen long years this woman has been trapped in her affliction. Who she is, her life story, her whole identity are all dissolved into the one thing, the only thing that people see anymore - that's she's bent over and crippled.

We know people like this woman, maybe some of us are like this woman, held captive by some ailment - a bad relationship, a lousy job, destructive habits, old ways.

Been livin' with those problems so long it's hard to tell anymore which is the person and which is the problem. Some ailments stay with us so long they become part of who we are.

I have two nieces who are in college now, but when they were small I used to baby-sit for them a lot. A few times I babysat for them an entire week while my brother and his wife were gone. We always had a great time together, but it was never very long into our time together before I found myself saying things to them that my mother said to me. "Don't run in the house." "If you want some dessert you'll have to eat your carrots first." Let me tell you, it's a little unsettling the first time you hear your parent's voice come out of your mouth, but it does point up how the messages we get when we're young tend to stay with us all of our lives. Fortunately, my parents gave me very loving and mostly supportive messages, but I have friends who, even as adults today, are still haunted by harsh or cruel criticism they received as kids. "You're not good enough." "You can't do it." "That's a boy's job." "Men don't cry." After all these years, they just can't seem to break loose of these chains.

Eighteen years is a long time. I wonder if this woman gave up hope. Sometimes when you've lived with something for so long, you start to think it's normal. We let others convince us, or we convince ourselves, that the situation can never change, I can never change. Just ask anyone dealing with some sort of addiction - drugs, alcohol, food, sex, gambling. It's a daily struggle that must constantly be confronted, but besides addictions there are all sorts of ailments that can weigh us down and cripple our spirits, sometimes without us even recognizing it.

There was a movie out several years ago called "Unstrung Heroes," a quirky movie about a quirky family. The father was a scientist and inventor whose eccentricities cause his son Stephen to wonder if maybe his father is from another planet. His inventions often go wrong and, as they do, Stephen's father becomes more determined to show that, with the help of science, you can control your world. When Stephen's mother becomes ill with cancer, and his father becomes obsessed with keeping her alive, Stephen's family life becomes

more stressful than he can handle, and he takes refuge in the company of his two crazy uncles. They can barely function in society. They spend most of their time evading the landlord who wants to evict them, or hiding from conspiracies which they see everywhere. And though it first appears that they help Stephen escape from reality, the reality of his mother's illness and approaching death, what they really do is to put him in touch with a deeper reality. With his two uncles, Stephen visits the grave of his grandmother, and begins to feel a connection to his family roots. They teach him to pray before meals, and to understand what it means to be a Jew. And when the time comes that Stephen must return to his family, to be there when his mother dies, his uncles give him the courage to do that. He doesn't want to go. There's pain and sadness at home. His father's love for his mother has blinded him to Stephen's needs. And his father's blind faith in science makes him unable to accept its limitations when it comes to this fatal illness. Stephen doesn't want to go back. But he has to, for his father's sake. "Sometimes," his uncle tells him, "people get trapped in their own histories, unless someone shows them the way out."

We see that in this story from Luke, people trapped in their own histories, and Jesus trying to show them the way out. In the middle of his teaching, or maybe this was part of his teaching - Jesus sees this woman, and he loves her, enough to want to see her set free from her ailment. Others may see only a bent-over woman with no name, but Jesus sees a daughter of Abraham. It's interesting that Luke doesn't say Jesus healed her, as he does in so many other cases, like the man with the withered hand whom Jesus healed. Jesus calls this woman over and says, "Woman," a title of respect in that day (it was how he addressed his own mother, you remember, at the wedding at Cana), so he says, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Held captive eighteen long years by a crippling spirit, she's not just healed, she's set free. Her long ordeal is ended, her chains are broken - and it happens on the Sabbath.

That, of course, brings him into conflict with the leadership of the synagogue. Why? Healing on the Sabbath, doing any kind of work on the Sabbath, violates the

commandment, "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy, as the Lord your God commanded you." Not wanting to confront Jesus directly, but just the same wanting to make his complaint known, the leader of the synagogue says to the crowd, "Go away. There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, not on the Sabbath." He's quoting the law here, and he's actually quite right. In the book of Deuteronomy, one of the two places where the ten commandments are listed, the people are commanded to remember the Sabbath like this: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall do no work." When Jesus helps this woman on the Sabbath, he challenges the letter of that law - and at the same time, he reveals the true meaning of the Sabbath.

The passage in Deuteronomy continues this way, to the people of Israel, "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day." Jesus offers freedom to this woman on the Sabbath, because he knows that's exactly what the Sabbath is for. This is not an emergency healing. This woman has lived with this condition for eighteen years. She could easily have come back the next morning during regular business hours to be healed. But Jesus chooses to heal her now on the Sabbath. The leader of the synagogue quoted the letter of the law to him, but Jesus obeyed the Spirit, and the result was freedom for this captive. Just as the Israelites were commanded to honor the Sabbath as a way of remembering that God delivered them from their captivity, Jesus honors the Sabbath by releasing this daughter of Abraham from slavery. And in response to that, she honors the Sabbath by standing up straight, maybe for the first time in her life, and praising God. Maybe she looked something like that. I often think about this passage when I look at that there. Of course this honored the Sabbath. As St. Ignatius said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." And the entire crowd rejoices with her. All the people say amen.

Only the leader of the synagogue fails to see this as another exodus, for which the Sabbath was created. Bound to the law, and blinded by it, he was as much a prisoner in his own way as the bent-over woman, trapped in his own history. Jesus tries to show him the way out, but unfortunately there is nothing in the story that suggests that he took it. Why did she say yes, and he say no? Maybe her chains were more obvious. Sometimes we're the last ones to be able to see the things that keep us trapped, and we need others to point them out to us. Maybe her chains were more painful. Sometimes we grow so accustomed to our bad habits that it feels safer to stay with them than to be set free.

I've been wondering lately how it is that people make these choices in their lives. Two people can go through the same experience and end up in two totally different places. Maybe it's the death of a child, or loss of their job, maybe some catastrophic experience like Hurricane Katrina, or the earthquake in Haiti. Maybe it's a bad relationship that finally breaks up, or one that should break up and doesn't. One person becomes embittered by the experience, hardens their heart so as never to be hurt again, and closes out the world. The other person uses the experience to reach out to the world, learns to be more compassionate towards others who are suffering, less judgmental, reaches out to others as a way to aid their own healing. Why does one person turn one way and one person the other? Is it just a chance encounter with God that moves some towards healing?

I don't think so. I don't think this was a chance encounter for this woman. Jesus went to the synagogue every week, trying to teach people how to be free. When he offered freedom to this woman, she made the choice to accept it gratefully, and she remembered to praise God. The leader of the synagogue had the same choice but refused his own freedom. Little did he know he was choosing the more difficult of the two paths.

I was listening to a program on National Public Radio and the host was interviewing a Palestinian about growing up in a refugee camp under Israeli occupation. The host asked this man how he could grow up being surrounded by a culture of war

and violence and hatred from both sides, and not grow up to be a hater himself. The man tried to describe the perspective of life as a refugee and he said they definitely felt that the Israelis were the enemy but he couldn't hate them really. It was just too much work to continue to hate. He found it was easier to forgive and move on. He was faced with a choice, to stay trapped in the culture of hatred and violence that surrounded him, or to accept the freedom that comes with forgiveness, and with choosing to forgive. He chose, like the bent over woman, to accept freedom when it was offered to him, and to be grateful for it. Whenever that happens the Sabbath is honored, a testament to God's promise for freedom for us all.

Jesus never forced the gospel on anyone. He offered freedom to both the bent-over woman and the leader of the synagogue and even though Jesus knew the stakes involved - their health, their happiness, their very lives - he allowed them to choose for themselves the path each would take. After all, Jesus chose his own path, because our freedom was so important to him.

Dulcie Abraham, a poet from Malaysia, has expressed this beautifully in one of her poems as many feminist and womanist theologians do. She looks at this gospel passage from the perspective of where she would fit in. So she writes of the experience of the bent over woman, from her perspective:

"His hands reached out and straightened me. The world spun round - I looked to find my savior - but he was gone... And I was straight and whole - I praised my God with joyful heart that God had set me free! One day when months had passed I saw my savior - now he was bent beneath a heavy tree... 'Weep not for me,' he said. And as I wept I knew it was to set me free my savior was bent beneath that heavy tree."

So, Jesus traded places with that bent-over woman. I don't think he would say that. I think he would say he traded places with that daughter of Abraham whom he loved. Because of what Jesus did, we're able to lead Sabbath lives, fashioned in freedom. His whole life, including his death was meant to set us free. When we

accept that freedom, and praise God for it, we honor the Sabbath, and keep it holy. The good news is the Sabbath is here. Good Sabbath to you.

Amen.