Rules, Laws, and Jesus

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Luke 13:10-17

 She had been this way for eighteen years. At first, it was not as noticeable. She would get up out of bed in the morning and her back would hurt. At first, the stiffness in her lower back would limber up in the warm, dry Palestinian air after a while. But as time progressed, the pain did so as well. More and more, her body refused to let her stand erect. She began to notice others looking at her, some sympathetically, others simply shaking their heads. Pretty soon, all she could look at was the bottom half of other people, most of the time her eyes cast on the ground beneath her feet. Some even suggested she offended God in some severe way, such that God was punishing her. That hurt, although she did not believe that.

 One day, one whose deeds were legendary came into her village. She had heard others talk about him, that he taught wisely and healed a great number of people. So, she went to hear what the fuss was all about. She stood at the edge of the crowd around him, close enough so she could hear him. How he saw her, she did not know, but he did. He came close, right up in front of her, placed his hand on her shoulder and said simply, “Woman, you are set free from your sickness.” What’s he talking about, she wondered. But a strange and powerful energy went through her with his words, something she had never felt before. And as he gently took her hand, he slowly brought her to a standing position. She could not believe it.

 And now, she is able to see with a whole new set of lenses. Once only able to stare at the ground, only able to get an alternate view by straining her neck for some sideline sight, only able to look at her own feet or those of another and never into their eyes, now she can see faces. Now she can see where she is going. Now she can see that God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Not that she didn’t see that before, but it’s different when the love of God becomes incarnated in your very self. She is now able to see what and who Jesus sees -- who needs to be cured. Who is in bondage. Those who are bent over with the weight of a world that continues not to care.

 This story portrays a physical miracle, a healing of someone suffering physical pain for nearly two decades. But beyond that healing we can see a woman being made whole. In the last summer Olympics, a new team was created. While most teams represent countries, this one was powerfully different. The team did not win a single race or competition; they may not have even scored a single point, for that matter. It mattered little. This team was composed entirely of refugees, people who fled a country to save their lives and the lives of their families. On that team was a woman by the name of Yusra Mardini. Mardini was a high-level swimmer in Syria, whose home was destroyed by a bomb. She and her sister decided to flee a year ago, going through Lebanon and Turkey, before getting into a small boat (built for 6 or 7 occupants) with eighteen others, heading for Greece. The boat’s motor failed, and it began taking on water. Ms. Mardini and her sister, along with the only other two people on board who could swim, got into the water where they spent over three hours pulling and pushing the boat to safety. Everyone survived, and the Mardini sisters and their parents eventually ended up in Berlin, where Yusra continued her training and was selected for the Refugee Olympic Team. She went on to compete, and though she did not win a single medal, it mattered little, in my book. She rose above unimaginable challenges and inspired millions. She even brought to the bright light of awareness the cruelty of political inhumanity.

This story inspires me in so many ways. It’s amazing how a sport became a vehicle for freedom from tyranny and danger. And how this young woman’s personal drama challenges assumptions and fears about refugees, just as the woman Jesus healed challenged the religious norms about sabbath activity.

 Whenever one person is able to rise from a situation that imprisons—illness, oppression, cruelty, misunderstanding, poverty—that story becomes part of the larger human narrative. It’s important to create a landscape where everyone has the opportunity to rise. Because the truth is, when any person rises, we all are inspired to stand a little straighter.

 Jesus’ religious haters wanted to make an issue of the healing occurring on the Sabbath. Identified simply as a “leader of the synagogue,” this defender of the religious establishment insists that Jesus could have healed the woman on any other day of the week and should have kept their Sabbath prescriptions intact. Jesus exposes their transparency – they resented that Jesus was getting attention and gaining a following. He reveals their hypocrisy for what it was: a superficial attempt to put Jesus in place. It was not about the Sabbath at all.

 So, before we throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater, let’s get something clear: Jesus was not saying we should relegate observance of the Sabbath to the junk heap of passé religious practices. The fact of the matter is that Jesus took quite seriously the observance of the Sabbath as a way to fulfill our full humanity and God’s intention for us.

But what had happened was that the observance of Sabbath was reduced to a long list of do’s and don’ts. By the time of Jesus, Sabbath observance turned out to be literally hundreds of prescribed behaviors, what you could or couldn’t do on Sabbath. Rather than freeing them from the labors of everyday life, it became a burden. That was not God’s intention, Jesus insists. “The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath,” he taught. Jesus’ teaching in reaction to the religious hypocrites was not about leaving Sabbath observance behind.

Rather, Jesus was asking us to go back to the basics, to see what Sabbath truly is and why God commanded that we practice Sabbath. Over the generations, the Jews had lost sight of the forest for the trees.

As important as the healing of the woman in this story is, it’s not the point of the story. It’s about how Sabbath is a gift of grace from God. J. Dana Trent, a Baptist clergywoman, recalls how Sabbath had become a point of contention between her mom and herself. She, holding down three part time jobs as a minister, writer and teacher at a community college, saw her life as a striving to make a life for herself. She had little time for a day of rest. Her mother, on the other hand, also a devout Christian, held on to the practice of Sabbath rest as part of her spiritual discipline. They clashed mightily in their approach to life. *You’re trying to do too much,* Trent recalls her mother chiding her. *No,* Trent recalls thinking, *I’m trying to be successful.* But success looked different to her mother. They engaged in this dance for the last seven years of her mother’s life. Her mom slowly and steadily letting go of this life; she gripping onto it as hard and as fast as she could. A piece of us, she remembered thinking, longed for what the other chose, but we never met in the middle. I coped with her withdrawal through nonstop wheel spinning; she met my at­tempt to exert godlike control over my life (and hers) by doubling down on her surrender.

She was not surprised, then, when her mother declined a life-saving surgical procedure. She had to reconcile herself to her mother’s decision, releasing her desire for her mom to combat her condition—to fight for what I, and the world, perceive as valuable: more time on earth. I let go. **Sabbath and death are, after all, an acceptance of what’s left undone in order to lean into that which transcends.** Letting go on a day of rest is to trade chaos for peace; letting go of the lives we’ve known is to trade the temporary for eternity. In both, we draw nearer to God. Sabbath, seen in this light, is a foretaste of the life lived fully with God.

Many of us have lost that, I believe. When God rested on the seventh day of creation, the work of creation was not done. God did not have to rest; there was much more to do. But God rested, not out of necessity, but because that is an essential part of the cycle of life. When we fail to observe Sabbath, we do so at our own peril. We fall out of sync with the cycle of life, and we are the worse for it. May we have both the wisdom and the will to accept the grace that is Sabbath, letting go of the need for control of our lives and living into the depths of our relationship with God.