



Rev. Chris Taylor - 8.25.19

"A Different Kind Of Law"

Jeremiah 1:4-10 & Luke 13:10-17

Back when I was in college a friend of mine had his car on campus one afternoon. Sitting beside him was his dog; a puppy that was about nine months old. We all had watched this puppy grow up. Something must have caught his attention because without warning he suddenly tried to leap out the open window. Something must have caught and he fell awkwardly, striking his head on the pavement below. His neck was broken, and Mario was devastated.

At that moment a campus security person came up and told Mario he had to move his car. He was parked illegally. Mario pointed to his dog and said his dog had just died. The officer said something to the effect that he was sorry about the dog but the car had to move or Mario was going to get a ticket. Now Mario was Captain of the hockey team. He wasn't exactly mild mannered, and for those of us who knew him we weren't particularly surprised that he exploded. The resulting altercation turned out badly for him.

That's the unfortunately thing about the Law. Both it and those who adhere to it can come across as rigid, unfeeling and even harsh at times. The law clearly has a place in our lives. Jesus himself said he didn't come to abolish it but to fulfill it, and not one stroke should be changed until all is accomplished (Mt. 5:17-18). The challenge for us is understanding its place in our life together. Get it wrong and we come across as narrow and judgmental. Get it right, however, and we become God's instruments; bringing God's light and love to those around us.

Here in our text we find Jesus' encounter with a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years. She was bent over, we are told, and unable to stand up straight. What that means is that for eighteen years she couldn't look up at the stars, couldn't watch the sun setting on the horizon, couldn't look a friend in the eyes as they spoke, couldn't see more than a few feet in front of her unless she turned and swiveled her head.

Did she wonder where God was in her suffering – wonder what she might have done to deserve such a punishment? Did her soul shrink, her spirit grow dark and bitter? Suffering can do that – can draw us down into an abyss of self-pity and anger. What was it like for her to live with that pain and all the restrictions that came with it?

Scripture doesn't tell us. What is striking, rather, is that she wasn't the one to initiate contact with Jesus. It was Jesus who saw her. Jesus who understood her need. Jesus who first reached out. And that reaction tells us something about God. It tells us that no matter who we are, no matter how obscure or insignificant we may feel God sees us. God knows us. God cares about us.

It is not unusual to go through a season when God feels very distant. The season might last for months or even, as it did for Mother Theresa, for years. What we need to remember in such times is that what we feel and what is true can be two different things. Just because we feel that God is distant or that God doesn't care doesn't mean God is. We find the truth about God not in our feelings of the moment, but in what we see of God in Jesus. And what we see we turn to him is that God never stops loving us; never stops caring; and that God is near whether we feel that presence or not.

We don't know if that crippled woman doubted. She certainly had every reason to. What we do know, what is so significant here is what she actually did: she never turned away. She kept worshipping, kept being a part of her faith community. She stayed with the disciplines of our faith.

And that is right where Jesus met her. Her life-changing encounter with Jesus came as she worshipped there amid the community of faith. That's why you and I need the Church so desperately; why we need to keep going with our spiritual practices regardless of what we might be feeling. For all its flaws, for all its shortcomings, this is the place where Jesus promises to be: "Wherever two or more are gathered in my name" (Mt. 18:20).

Felt or unfelt, bidden or unbidden, God is near. God knows us, and God is with us, always.

What then was the source of this woman's struggles? One of the things I love about this text is Jesus' clarity in answering that question. It wasn't God who

crippled her. It wasn't God punishing her for something she had done. No, here in the sixteenth verse Jesus says it was Satan who had bound this woman for eighteen years – Satan, the anti-God and everything that is opposed to God. What God wants for us is all that is good and true and beautiful and loving. The things that set us back – death, loss, illness, struggle – they are, in fact, a contradiction of God's essence; a reflection not of God but of the broken world in which we live.

So what does Jesus do? He heals her. He restores her. He sets this woman free. In Jesus, the Kingdom of God has broken into this world and it is that Kingdom which this woman now experiences.

So was he wrong to heal her on the Sabbath? The call to honor the Sabbath goes all the way back to the beginning of time when God rested on the seventh day. It is one of the Ten Commandments. It is one of the ways in which we honor God and keep our lives centered on what matters most; keep our lives grounded on the one, sure foundation. In this sense, that synagogue leader was right. There are six other days Jesus could have healed that woman. Why couldn't he have waited just a few more hours?

But who is the Sabbath for? The leader wasn't wrong in reminding people of our need to honor it. Where he missed it, where we sometimes miss it, was in forgetting that the Law was given to serve us, not the other way around. The Law is not our God. God is God.

Consider a traffic light. We all know the law: go on green; stop on red. And we know the purpose of that law: to facilitate the flow of traffic and keep us safe. The law is a good thing, and we are careful to follow it. But now imagine that it is late at night and sitting beside you in the car is a loved one who is suffering a heart attack. You are rushing to get to the hospital and come to a red light. What do you do?

My guess is that most of you would take a look around for any other traffic, and then go through the light. The choice is pretty clear: getting your loved one to the hospital as quickly as possible is the priority. Now I don't want to encourage anyone to break the law here, but it seems to me that if we insist on sitting at that light even though it could jeopardize the life of the person beside us, then maybe we are missing the point of what that light is all about in the first place: protecting life.

The Sabbath is for our benefit, not God's. Observing it, honoring it, is integral to our own spiritual and emotional and even physical health. It reflects the way we are wired. It is part of the rhythm of all creation. But ultimately the Sabbath, like all the rest of God's Law, is about life and if a strict adherence in a particular situation – a kind of black and white rote obedience such as that synagogue leader was advocating – undermines life, then clearly (like that stop light) we have got it wrong.

If we understand the underlying purpose of the Sabbath and the purpose of all the Law – to bring us life – then we can begin to understand Jesus' choice. It wasn't that the synagogue leader was wrong in saying we should honor the Sabbath. We should. It is that Jesus took the meaning and purpose of the Sabbath to its heart: surely there is no better way to honor the Sabbath day than by bringing life to someone in desperate need; no better way to honor God than by setting free the burdened and the oppressed, and bringing justice and wholeness to those who stand on the fringes.

May God grant us the grace so to life.