Scripture: Luke 13:10-17

Sermon in a sentence - Serving God Seven Days a Week

Text - Our Gospel lesson tells a story that we like a lot. A woman with a long-standing disability came to the synagogue to worship. Jesus saw her, called her over, and healed her of her infirmity. The leader of the synagogue took exception and told the crowd, "There are six days in which men ought to work. Therefore come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day!" Jesus quickly put the man in his place, and the crowd rejoiced.

We can easily understand the crowd's rejoicing. They had to live with this synagogue leader day by day, and he was surely a "letter-of-the-law" kinda guy - a man who lived by the book - a small man who used his authority to make other people uncomfortable - a man who could have used his authority to make life easier, but who instead made life more difficult. The people had grown accustomed to living under his petty rule, knowing that his judgment was final. The man did, after all, know the law, and that gave him power. How do you fight a man who knows all the rules - especially when they're God's rules? These villagers had never seen anyone stand up to the synagogue leader. They had never seen anyone successfully challenge him.

Then Jesus healed this woman on the Sabbath. The synagogue leader responded as he always did. There was a sharp bite in his criticism. "There are six days in which men ought to work. Therefore come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day!"

Note that the man did not address his comments to Jesus, but to the crowd. He didn't tell Jesus not to heal on the Sabbath, but told the crowd not to come for healing on the Sabbath. He had surely heard the stories about men who challenged Jesus publicly only to find themselves cut to pieces by a few well-chosen words. The synagogue leader was not anxious to find himself lying on the cutting room floor. He didn't want to go head to head with Jesus in this public place. Still, he had a responsibility to defend the law - God's law - and he could not let Jesus' infraction pass without comment. Afraid to rebuke Jesus, he rebuked the crowds. Don't come for healing on the Sabbath! There are six days to get healed. Let's spend the seventh day honoring God, as God commanded us to do.

Then Jesus did what Jesus always did with men of this sort. He quickly punctured the man's pomposity and deflated him in front of the crowd, which cheered at the man's demise. Jesus said, Hypocrite!

- You would comfort an ox or a donkey on the Sabbath! Shouldn't we be able to bring comfort to this woman - a child of God - on the Sabbath!

- Shouldn't we release her from Satan's grip on the Sabbath!

- Would you prohibit compassion and mercy on the Sabbath!

The crowd loved it! The crowd cheered! Finally, the bully had met his match! Good for Jesus! Hooray!!!
We like this story too, because we too have suffered at the hands of small men wearing big suits. We have suffered their criticism and their carping and their second-guessing. They have blocked us and forced us into places that we didn't want to go. We would like Jesus to sweep into town, smash the tyrants, and set things straight.

But I must admit feeling torn here. I have some sympathy for the synagogue leader. The villagers had invested him with responsibility for their spiritual life, and he was doing the best that he knew how. He had probably been as excited as anyone that Jesus was coming to town. He was looking forward to hearing what the young prophet had to say. He knew that Jesus had a bit of a reputation, but he took a chance and invited Jesus to speak in the synagogue. He knew that the people wanted to hear Jesus, so he crossed his fingers and hoped for the best.

Now things had taken a nasty turn. Jesus had seen one of the synagogue regulars - a woman with a back problem - and he laid hands on her right there in the synagogue - and suddenly the woman stood straight for the first time in eighteen years.

The synagogue leader was torn. One part of him was happy for the woman, whom he had known for years and who was a nice enough lady. The other part of him, however, was offended by the way things had gone. It didn't seem right that Jesus had called public attention to a woman right there in the synagogue. It didn't seem right that He had touched her. It certainly didn't seem right that He had done all this on the Sabbath. The Fourth Commandment was very clear. Listen carefully:

"Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. You shall labor six days, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to Yahweh your God. You shall not do any work in it, you, nor your son, nor your daughter, your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your livestock, nor your stranger who is within your gates; for in six days Yahweh made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore Yahweh blessed the Sabbath day, and made it holy." (Exodus 20: 8-11)

That's an interesting commandment. Most of the Ten Commandments are short.

- "You shall not murder."

- "You shall not commit adultery."

- "You shall not steal."

But the commandment prohibiting work on the Sabbath is one of two lengthy commandments. The commandment that prohibits idolatry is the other long one. Both of these lengthy commandments are among the four which deal with our relationship to God. The other six commandments, having to do with our relationship with each other, are shorter. It would seem that God was placing special emphasis on the commandments which prohibited idolatry and work on the Sabbath.
These two commandments - prohibiting idolatry and Sabbath work - helped to form the Jewish identity. They, more than the other commandments, distinguished the Jewish people from their neighbors. Their abstinence from Sabbath work showed their devotion to God. For six days a week, they lived like most people, working in the fields, carrying water from the well, preparing dinner, repairing the hole in the roof. On the Sabbath, however, they were different - noticeably different. On the Sabbath, they rested, just as God had rested after the creation. On the Sabbath, they worshipped. On the Sabbath, they demonstrated their faith that God would honor their faithful observance. They didn't have to work 24/7 to put food on the table. They were God's people, and they could devote one day a week to God without penalty. God would honor their devotion and see that they had what they needed. Their Sabbath observance was a great testimony to their faith and a great witness to their neighbors.

Christians are no longer required to observe the Sabbath. Early Christians began to worship on Sunday instead of the Sabbath, because the Lord was resurrected on Sunday. Still, we could learn something from the Jewish Sabbath observance. We live in a 24/7 world. We always have time to work. We sometimes have time to play. We have what seems to be a shrinking amount of time for family - or God - or anything else precious. Is there anyone [here] who believes that we are the better for our busyness? I certainly don't! I believe that, if we would devote a day a week to rest and worship that God would bless us for it.

So I have some sympathy for the synagogue leader who said, Jesus, couldn't you have waited until tomorrow! Couldn't you have saved your good deed one more day! We respect the fact that you wanted to help this woman, and we know that she needed help! She has needed help for eighteen years! What difference would one more day make! The Sabbath is our day to honor God! That isn't my idea, Jesus! It's God's idea! It's God's commandment! One of the Ten Commandments! Given to Moses on the Mountain! Carved in stone by God's finger! Please, Jesus, don't step on our Sabbath observance!

I also respect the synagogue leader for having the courage of his convictions. He had a duty to uphold Godly standards, and he was doing his best! He thought that he was doing the right thing! He knew that, by challenging Jesus, he was risking public humiliation. The easiest thing for the synagogue leader would have been to stay on the sidelines and keep his mouth shut, but he couldn't do that. He had a job to do, and he tried to do it. I respect that! Anyone who has ever served in any position of trust can respect that! Every teacher! Every police officer! Every executive! Every supervisor! Every soldier! Sometimes we have to stand up for what is right, and sometimes that isn't very popular!

So the synagogue leader stepped up to the plate, and Jesus threw him three strikes. Back to the bench, Mr. Synagogue Leader! You might think that Jesus' rough treatment confirmed that this was a bad man, but it doesn't. Jesus had equally sharp words for Martha when Martha complained about her sister, Mary. He had equally sharp words for Peter. Jesus even had sharp words on occasion for His own mother. These weren't villains. They were good people. I think that this synagogue leader may have been a decent sort as well.

But he was wrong at this point, and Jesus made a point of it. Jesus used this poor, hapless man to teach all of us a lesson. The lesson is that we need to temper all of life with compassion. It is
RIGHT to do good on the Sabbath. It is RIGHT to help someone on the Sabbath. We honor God by our works of compassion.

Today, we no longer need permission to do good on the Sabbath. We already feel free to do what we want on the Sabbath. Too free!

But there is still a lesson here for us - that we should temper all of life with compassion. Just as Jesus honored God with this Sabbath healing, so we can honor God with compassion at our work. Just as Jesus honored God with this Sabbath healing, we can honor God with compassion at home. An encouraging word! A helping hand! A shoulder to cry on! God calls us to these every day of the week.

Our workplace is more than a place to make money. It is also a place to make a difference. It is a place to honor God with compassion and kindness. Our business is about more than maximizing profits or the value of a share of stock. It is a God-given opportunity to make life better for people - customers, employees, co-workers - even bosses. Our home is more than a place to eat and sleep. It is a place to honor God with the compassion and kindness we show to our husband - our wife - our children - our neighbors.

We have no right to be critical of the synagogue leader until we have served God as faithfully as he did. He tried to serve God by keeping the rules of Sabbath observance. Let us serve God by acts of kindness and mercy.

Please pray for me and know that I am praying for you. Peace friends, chuck.