

A Palace In Time

^{NRS} Luk 13:10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹ And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." ¹⁵ But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?" ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Whenever I think about the word Sabbath, I'm embarrassed to say that two things immediately pop into my mind: one is Ozzy Osbourne's band from the 70's, Black Sabbath; and the other is that movie with Ben Stiller, Ed Norton, and Jenna Elfman- Keeping the Faith. You know, the one where Stiller's a rabbi, his best friend is a priest, and they both fall in love with the same woman. You know there's a part where Stiller opens Shabbat, or Sabbath, services one night just like any other night saying, "Shabbat shalom." And the congregation mumbles back, "Shabbat shalom" like sleepy school children on Monday morning. And he tells them they are no where near the level of Shabbat shalominess they can hit, and he has them keep on saying it until they're finally ready to worship. The honest truth is that when I hear the word Sabbath, I don't think of the million fantastic and deep things I learned in seminary- I think about Ozzy Osbourne and that unfortunate bat and my own questionable level of Shabbat Shalominess.

And I don't think I'm alone. The Sabbath, the Biblical Sabbath, is something we just don't get in Protestant circles. For all of our bluster about taking the Bible so

seriously, so literally- there's not a Protestant I know who I'd say does much in the way of keeping the Sabbath, and I mean really keeping it like our brothers and sisters in the synagogue do. Oh, we used to do a bit more I suppose. I know some of you grew up when you didn't go shopping on Sunday and you CERTAINLY didn't go to a movie or something dreadful like that. But for most blue laws were really more of a set of "don'ts" than a set of "do's" showing how to really hallow the Sabbath. I mean most of the time it had the opposite effect than what the Bible actually intends- Sabbath in the Bible is supposed to be a fun day, a day to celebrate, a day to live as if the kingdom of God were already here. With our laws we just turned it into a day you couldn't hit the grocery store, or buy a bottle of Pinot, or kick back with Forrest Gump. But, if it wasn't perfect, at least we were thinking about it back then- we don't even think about it today. Sabbath isn't even close to our radar screen today. And, at least according to Scripture, we're missing out on an enormous opportunity here.

See, in the Bible the Sabbath isn't just something on the periphery- it's absolutely central, at the heart of the faith. With Sabbath it's not like God says, "Hey, you all might want to think about setting some time apart." Or, "Hey, you know I was just thinking, maybe take a day off now and then- or don't. But, you know, no big deal. Up to you." No, Sabbath even makes God's top ten, it makes the ten commandments. You've got: you shall have no other Gods, you shall not make any idols, no wrongful use of God's name (not even when driving!), and, coming in at number 4, you shall remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

But it's not that God is simply ordering us around here just for the sake of being commanding- no, it's because the Sabbath is such a gift to us. It's such a gift.

Underneath the Sabbath is the wisdom that what is most important in life isn't anything we can buy, sell, or own- what is most important in life is time. You've heard it a zillion times but it's true- no one on their death bed wishes they had worked more or had more stuff. No, if we regret anything it's that we worked too much and didn't spend enough time with the people we love. The wisdom of the Sabbath is work is good, it's a blessing- but what is most valuable in life is time, and it is right to hallow some of this time, to set it aside.

I guess that's why I've sympathized so much with the synagogue leader this week. This week as I listened to this text again and again, I just found myself entirely on the side of the synagogue leader and completely frustrated with Jesus. You know, occupationally some might see this as a bit of a problem. Generally, we pastors are expected to be fairly pro-Jesus. Some congregations even want us to be downright cheerleaders for him. But, I have to say, this week it's been hard for me to sympathize with him.

Take a look at what's going on. It's Shabbat- it's Friday night. And the synagogue is the hot place to be, the joint is jumping. And there Jesus is, doing his thing. He's just preaching away. Now already, you've got to give the synagogue leader a heck of a lot of credit, right? I mean religious leadership has a TERRIBLE reputation all throughout the Gospels, right? The only people it seems Jesus really can't stand are pastors, people like me- seminary trained little know-it-alls who keep trying to put all these rules in the way people's relationship with God. And the leaders don't care much for Jesus either, this long haired punk who keeps showing them up all the while hanging

out with the wrong crowd. But *this* guy- *this* synagogue leader is different. He actually invites Jesus in to hear what he has to say- and not just in his office, but invites him to worship, and not just to worship with them, but to speak. He gives the young man a chance. Now, I'm telling you- his friends at Presbytery would NOT have been amused by this. So right off the bat, you just know this synagogue leader is different. He isn't like the others- the ones who have their minds all made up. No, this guy is willing to take a risk or two.

And so there Jesus is, preaching away- when everything stops. There's an audible gasp as that woman, that woman who is all stooped over just appears as if out of nowhere. Oh, they've all seen her. I mean for years she's been like this. No one really knew what happened to her- but at least she had the common decency to stay out of the way, to keep her head down, and not make the rest of them feel too uncomfortable. But not this night. No, this night she's right in front of them and she's all bent over like a question mark- the question being what will happen next.

And of course, true to form, our hero does what we expect him to do. He calls her over, tells her she is freed, and places his hands on her, and he tells the crowd she's a human being. He tells them they've been treating their animals better than they've been treating her.

Now, of course part of me thinks this is great. I mean how can you be against healing, right? But on the other hand, what the synagogue leader says makes a lot of sense, too. See, he doesn't object to Jesus healing- I'm sure he's as excited as anyone else. What he objects to here is the *timing* of the healing- why did Jesus have to interrupt Sabbath to do this? And really, he's got a point. I mean it's not like this woman has been

struck by an emergency, something the rabbis absolutely made allowances for. No, the text is very clear- she's had this problem for *18 long years*. 18 years. It's not like it's a crisis. So what's one day in the face of 18 years?

And while the healing was good for this woman, this individual, the Sabbath is good for the whole community. Abraham Heschel, probably my favorite theologian writes about how crucial the Sabbath is in the life of faith. He writes when we keep Sabbath we create a "palace in time". (Heschel, Sabbath, p. 15) A palace in time- isn't that an incredible image? "The Sabbaths" he writes, "are our great cathedrals; and this Holy of Holies is a shrine that neither the Romans nor the Germans were able to burn." (Heschel, Sabbath, p. 8) No matter what's going on, whether times are great or whether they're lousy, we can always carve time out to be together. Even if our buildings are torched, we can celebrate Sabbath together. And this, to Heschel, this is why people of faith have always survived and will always survive no matter what. It's the Sabbath- this palace in time.

So given the importance of the Sabbath, given the nature of the woman's illness, why couldn't Jesus, just this once, say to her tonight they'll pray, and then after that he'll heal her? It seems to me what we need is more Sabbath- not less.

Well, the good news for me, and for my career, is that this isn't the only way to understand this passage. Ironically, it's this same Rabbi, Abraham Heschel, this man so passionate about keeping the Sabbath, who helped me finally to see this week to see Jesus' side of things. See, to Heschel one of the most significant aspects of Sabbath is *menuha*, the Hebrew word most often translated as rest. When we think of the Sabbath,

we think of it a time of rest- a time when we DON'T do things. And this is OK, he says, but *menuha* is more than just rest, it's more than just not doing things. He writes: “*Menuha*, which we usually render with ‘rest’ means here much more than withdrawal from labor and exertion...*Menuha* is not a negative concept but something real and intrinsically positive [and creative]...What is created? Tranquility, serenity, peace, [and wholeness].” In other words the Sabbath isn't just a time for resting from our work, it's also a time for creating something very special- for creating peace, creating wholeness. In the 23rd Psalm for instance when we hear “The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, he maketh me to lie down in green pastures, he leadeth me beside still waters”- the word for still waters here is *menuhot*. The point? Sabbath isn't just about not doing things- Sabbath is also about creating things, creating wholeness, creating still waters- and celebrating what it will be like when God's kingdom is come. And when Jesus sees that woman all bent over for 18 years, seeing she had been without green pastures and still waters for a long, long time, he what he had to do to create *menuha* there. He knew what he had to do in order for them all to keep Sabbath. See, at least in Heschel's eyes, Jesus doesn't break Sabbath, he just keeps it in a different way.

You know, I'd love it if we could all figure out how to do Sabbath for real- to set aside 24 hours every week, light candles, and really not do anything remotely like work. The Bible is right on about this, I think. If we could do this, learn to hallow time like this, I think we really might learn how to become, if not happier- perhaps more free, more accepting, more able to celebrate and less likely to whine.

But, I'm honestly not sure how practical this is given the world we're in. I really wonder about hallowing 24 hours given the realities many of us face. But even if we can't keep Sabbath in the usual way, I know it's possible to start keeping it in different ways. If we can't do 24, we can take a few hours. And if we can't follow some grand Shabbat ritual, we might at least honor some of the patterns and habits we already keep in which we find Sabbath moments.

Last week, Melis showed me a collection of letters parents had written to their children to be read later in their lives. They were all amazing- but one of them just floored me. In this one a father writes to his baby girl a letter to be opened by her on her wedding day. In it he describes a ritual, a pattern his family honors every morning- and the Sabbath moment that emerges from it.

“Sloane! Hey, bug! Who's a bug? Who's a bug? Are you a little bug?
I hope that still makes you laugh. In 2007 I kill with that. Sometimes you laugh so hard, I think you're going to turn inside out. But if you are reading this letter, you haven't. You are still right side in, and you are getting married. I wonder what year it is. When do people get married in the future? Your mother and I got married late compared with our parents. I do hope you're not 75. I understand that you may want to have your fun and travel, but 75 is way too old to get married for the first time.

Are you happy? Are you the person you want to be? I hope so. If not, don't worry; you still have plenty of time. I hope this person you're marrying helps you out with that.

Here's a good question: Do you still make "the goofy face"? Let me explain. The other morning, I got you out of your crib (are you sleeping past 6:30 AM these days?) and brought you into bed with us like I always do. I laid you next to your mother and you turned and looked at me with the goofy face. It's a very calm yet intentionally piercing gaze, contemplative in the way you cock your head and purse your lips at me. You don't stare at your mom in this fashion. It's almost as if you know I'm going to say something stupid and are giving me the requisite look, pre-embarrassment.

"She's making that goofy face again," I said to your mom.

"That's not a goofy face," your mom said. "That's a mature face."

And at that moment everything changed. I saw you as you may look today, reading this letter. I saw a flash of the young woman you may become. And in that flash I fell more deeply in love with you, if that's even possible. I reveled for a second in the relationship that we have barely begun to forge. I can't wait...Bless you, Sloaney Baloney. My little girl. My little bug." (Rob Corddry in Real Simple Family Issue 2007, p. 129)

I don't know if Rob Corddry and his family keep Sabbath, but I do know in that hallowed time and pattern of getting his baby girl out of her crib, bleary eyed at 6:30 in the morning and bringing her to bed with mom and then studying her face, searching for that goofy, serious face- in that hallowed time they found a Sabbath moment together. And in this Sabbath moment- the future and present collided, and he caught a glimpse of his wedding banquet daughter to be in her round, baby face, and felt the heaviness of wonder at what it is to hope and to dream.

My friends, whether we've come here standing tall, or whether life has bent you over this morning, hear the good news: no matter what our level of Shabbat Shalominess, even now we have entered into the presence of Christ. He is here! And nothing, nothing in heaven or on earth will keep him from laying his hands upon us and whispering in our hearts, "Stand up straight. Stand up! You are free." **Shabbat Shalom!**