

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There is some deep irony in our Gospel reading today that I want to explore a little with you because I think it throws some light on the irony of our own situation at this point in our history, as individuals, as a church, and as a nation.

There are three movements in this story from Luke's Gospel. The first movement is Jesus noticing, and then healing, a woman bent over from some kind of debilitating ailment. The second movement is the leader of the synagogue complaining about Jesus breaking the Sabbath law. And the third movement is Jesus' response to that criticism.

The point of this story hinges on the Sabbath law and why it was instituted in the first place. Listen to this, from Deuteronomy chapter 5, one of two places where the Ten Commandments are found in the Bible. The Sabbath law is the third commandment:

“Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, ... <sup>13</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work. <sup>14</sup>But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. <sup>15</sup>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.”

So, observing the Sabbath law was supposed to be about two things: 1. not working and 2. remembering who you are in relation to God and your fellow human beings. The leader of the synagogue is focused on the first part, pointing out that Jesus has technically done some work by healing the woman. Now I would argue that Jesus was *already* doing work before that by preaching and teaching. I know *I* consider that work. But apparently no one in this story thought that counted, so I'll let that go for now. But healing, that was definitely considered work. So, the synagogue leader is upset about Jesus doing work, but he does not seem concerned about the second part, and this is where the irony comes in. Because the two parts of the commandment are connected. There's a lot of elaboration on the first part, on *who* shouldn't work on the Sabbath (nobody). But the point of not working is to make the second part possible, which is really what the Sabbath is all about. You need to take a break from the constant busy-ness of daily life to have time to gather with others and to contemplate your place in the world. The Sabbath is for God's people to remember their history – to remember where they came from, that they had been slaves in Egypt and God rescued them. God had had mercy on them and rescued them from a desperate situation. Now here is Jesus, who had just been teaching about God – and on this occasion Luke doesn't tell us what he was talking about, but I'd say there's a good chance he'd been talking about the same things he was talking about back in chapter four where we do get to read some of what he was saying: that the Spirit of the Lord was sending him to proclaim release to the captives, good news to the poor, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed. And then he literally does what he was just teaching about – he sets this woman free from her oppressive condition. Now that's what I call a sermon illustration! And what does she do when she is freed? She does exactly what the Israelites did when they were freed from Egypt: she praises God! This is what the Sabbath is about! This is what it is for. How much more perfect could this be as a Sabbath activity? But the synagogue leader does not like it. He tries to stir up the assembly against Jesus, and against the woman. Jesus should stay in his lane, stick to teaching about God. He has no business *actually* having mercy, *actually* rescuing, *actually* liberating someone!

Because that's work! "That's not how we do things here," he might have been thinking. And he's not the only one. It's clear that there are others here who agree with him, even if he's the only one speaking.

Jesus responds by calling him and his friends "hypocrites." The Greek word that Luke uses here is exactly that, "hypocrites," but it has allusions that we might not catch. It was originally used for actors. A "hypocrite" was someone who pretended to be someone he or she wasn't – that's what acting is, right? It's putting on a show to entertain others, and of course, to make a living, to benefit from putting on the show. It's why actors were morally suspect in the ancient world – and not only in the ancient world. But it's one thing to put on an act in the theater, and quite another to do so in daily life, and that's what Jesus is criticizing here. And how does he know that the synagogue leader and his friends are play-acting, being "hypocrites"? Because he knows they themselves have no problem untying their own animals – freeing them – to take them to get a drink. Everybody does that. It's an explicit exception to the no-work rule in the Sabbath law. So they're happy to make this exception for animals, but not for a daughter of Abraham, one of God's own children who needs help that Jesus can give. They've completely missed the point of the Sabbath, remembering God's mercy, and God's liberation from bondage.

What does this have to do with us? Well, to get the point of this story I'm afraid you're going to have to follow my rule of imagining yourself as the bad guy here. We have to allow ourselves to be identified with the synagogue leader and his friends if we are to apply Jesus' teaching here to our own lives. The easy thing to do right now would be to point out the rank hypocrisy of our politicians, who gleefully and stridently point out the transgressions of their political enemies, but who can turn on a dime to defend and explain away the same behavior when it's done by themselves or a member of their own political tribe. It's all over the news these days. Maybe you've noticed. But that's too easy, and it gets us off the hook. Because our politicians are only the symptoms of our own hypocrisy. We are the ones who vote them into office, often because they promise to do things to help us, often at the expense of others and the common good. And there are plenty of other examples our own hypocrisy in daily life. I don't know what kind of driver you are, but maybe you've uttered an unkind word at another driver who cut you off. And maybe you've also gotten indignant when another driver honked their horn at you when *you* did something unsafe. Maybe they were in your blind spot when you changed lanes. It was an accident, you tell yourself, an honest mistake. But you're not as understanding when it comes to others' mistakes. This petty little example of hypocrisy points to more consequential behaviors when we enable hypocritical standards to proliferate in our legal and political systems, when whole classes of people are treated differently because of who they are or how much money they make, or don't make, when we give some people the benefit of the doubt and subject others to our suspicions and fears. It's a constant danger that we need to be alert to.

"Remember that you were slaves whom God freed," the third commandment told the people of Israel. Remember that you are a sinner, in captivity to sin and unable to free yourself, whom Jesus has had mercy on, and by his death and resurrection liberated you from sin, death, and evil. This is why we gather on our Sunday Sabbaths, dear people of God. To remember who we are in relation to God, to remember God's love and mercy toward us in Jesus Christ so that we might be empowered and enabled to reflect that love and mercy to our fellow human beings, even and especially those who are not in our tribe. May God open our hearts to acknowledge our hypocrisy, receive Christ's forgiveness, and extend God's love and mercy to others. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.