



University Christian Church
(Disciples of Christ)
Austin, Texas

C. Kutz-Marks

FREED TO REJOICE

Lent 3, March 11, 2007

Luke 13:10-17

The Sabbath! The glorious Sabbath. The special day that God set aside, to rest from God's own labors in the creation of the earth as we read the story in the first and second chapters of Genesis.

It was instituted at the very heart of our Judeo-Christian tradition in the 10 Ten Commandments:

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy.

9 Six days you shall labor and do all your work.

10 But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work--you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.

Sabbath! A whole day set aside-- says the story-- in the very fabric of creation to honor God, and to do so, not by special extraordinary efforts of own, but rather by stopping all of our DOING.... and simply resting, enjoying, appreciating, thanking God! It is meant to be a day of delight, of bliss, of enjoyment.

*

But something happened... something not so difficult to understand. Imagine that at one time, the people of Israel, in obedience to God's call to honor the Sabbath found a wholesome day of community sharing each week, a day of family richness. Do you think it might have been like a weekly Thanksgiving Day feast such as we hold once a year? On Thanksgiving Day,

no one in the proper mood for the day would rush in to the office to take care of a bit of paperwork; or hop onto the tractor to go harvest a few more acres of corn. In the spirit of such a special holiday, we stop our doing..... and rest.

In order to keep things fair and firm in ancient Israel, more elaborate laws were instituted to make sure that **NOBODY** did work on the Sabbath. Working on the Sabbath wasn't just a personal sin, the whole community was understood to suffer if even a few individuals broke God's commands. So, the people had to build not just a mental wall between the Sabbath and the other six days; but also a clear and enforceable wall of legal division... in order to keep the day precious, reserved, respected.

As folks began to test the limits of the Sabbath laws, the leaders became more strict even, shall we say, picayune? Two years ago I discovered personally that in Israel today, though the nation is largely a secular Jewish state, if you are foolish enough to drive your car in the very conservative Jewish sections of Jerusalem on the Sabbath, you'll likely have children and adults alike throwing rocks at your car trying to stop you from – in their eyes - profaning the Sabbath by leaving your abode.

The same limits appeared in Jesus' day. Finally, it became clear, that even works of mercy would be prohibited. On the Sabbath, all work should cease, in order to give praise to God, and to enjoy God's creation.¹

Jesus absorbed this understanding of the Sabbath, and as far as we can determine, Jesus must have honored it for much of Jesus' earthly life. So why on this occasion did Jesus go ahead and heal the bent-over woman on the Sabbath?

Why didn't Jesus just wait a day until there was no rule in effect? What made Jesus go and heal her right away upon seeing her?

*

By now, it must be clear, that for Jesus, compassion was the main quality of God. Loving, Ache sharing. And for Jesus, the main moral quality of any person's life centered in the imitation of God's compassion. So it is that scripture succinctly says, "Be compassionate as God is compassionate."

If we look at the Hebrew and Aramaic words for compassion, we find that compassion is the plural of a noun that in its singular form means "womb". In the Hebrew Bible, compassion is both a feeling and a way of being that flows out of that feeling. So a woman feels compassion for the child of her own womb...a man feels compassion for his brother, who comes from the same womb.

In Jeremiah we find Yahweh - God - showing compassion:

Thus says Yahweh:
Is Ephraim (Israel) my dear son? my darling child?
For the more I speak of him,
the more I do remember him.
Therefore my womb trembles for him;
I will truly show motherly-compassion upon him. (*Jer. 31;20*)

For Jesus, compassion was more than a quality of God and an individual virtue. To put it bluntly, compassion for Jesus was political. Jesus directly and repeatedly challenged the world around him with what might be called the politics of compassion. This put Jesus in direct conflict with the very basis purity laws. As Jesus put it in Mk. 2: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath." And we probably find right here the answer to our question. Why did Jesus heal

the bent over woman on the Sabbath? In addition to the desire to immediately heal her suffering, Jesus had a point to make.

You see, this purity conflict was quite a deal, since in Jesus' day, to be holy like God was understood to mean being separate from everything unclean. One's purity status depended to some degree on birth: priests and Levites being most pure, then Israelites, then converts and so on.

One's purity status depended also on behavior. If you carefully observed the purity codes, you were among the pure. The worst of those who did not observe the codes were "outcasts" like tax collectors and perhaps shepherds

Further, in a way that might be hard for us today to understand, physical wholeness was associated with purity. People who were not "whole" in a physical sense - like the maimed, the chronically ill, lepers, eunuchs, and women bent over for 18 years were all considered impure.

Recall Jesus' disciples expressing this same assumption in John 9:2 , "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

Jesus' shows his rejection of this purity system when He answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him."

Then, too, purity was associated with what economic class you were in - rich, poor...Though not all rich people were on the pure side, being extremely poor almost certainly made you impure. Scripture was quoted ("the righteous will prosper")...and so it was thought that if you were poor it must show that you did not live right.

If you were a man, generally speaking, you were thought to be more pure than a woman. The woman's bodily processes, including childbirth,

were considered sources of impurity.

If you were a Jew, you may or may not have been pure, but all gentiles were *ipso facto* impure and unclean.

It was into this society which had such strict boundaries, such strict fences between people regarding who were pure and who were impure, that Jesus lifted so highly the ethic of compassion.

*

What is there to do when the whole rug seems to be pulled out from underneath you? Just put yourself into the place of these leaders of the synagogue. Or perhaps it's easy for you to imagine. Have you grown up with certain beliefs or rules of conduct that in your earlier life experience the church stood for and endorsed? And does this church here today stand for and endorse them all in the same way? And if not, are you offended?

Someone who believes the church should never perform a wedding for a couple that has been living together or a couple that have come together after one of the parties has divorced, such a person - would be offended at our practices here at University Christian Church. We perform weddings for all those who seek a Christian service of blessing upon their marriage vows--- without judgment upon their pasts.

Someone who believes that the church should not minister to or welcome into the congregation, those who suffer from AIDS because they sincerely believe that AIDS has been singled out by God as some kind of purification instrument, such a person - would be ill at ease in our congregation which sees AIDS not as God's judgment, but as God's challenge to the faithful to reach out a helpful hand to those in our day who are on the excluded margins of society.

Someone who believes the church should not welcome gays or lesbians as part of our congregation might be shocked that we do not require a particular sexual orientation to be a member of this church. We don't require a conservative religious view, nor do we require a liberal one. In compassion, all are welcome here.

Others would be horrified that ex-convicts, that politicians, that IRS agents, that former drug smugglers, that nearly every sort person under the sun would be welcomed and nurtured... would be "wombed" in the Hebrew, in the fellowship here that doesn't first judge someone's life style, but only asks for their life direction and their life's Lord! "Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, son of the living God, and do you intend to follow Christ all the days of your life?"

What we do require here at University Christian Church is an uncommon level of compassion. Humanly, it would be easier, simpler to live behind the easily named fences that our society uses to include some and exclude others. But we require Compassion. Compassion that stretches the boundaries of the comfortable... Compassion that is even willing to sacrifice the whole PURITY SYSTEM way of thinking, if that's what it takes to love others.

Rita Snowden tells a story of the war. In France some soldiers with their sergeant brought the body of a dead comrade to a French cemetery to have him buried. The priest told them gently that he was bound to ask if their comrade had been a baptized adherent of the Roman Catholic Church. They said that they did not know. The priest said that he was very sorry but in that case he could not permit burial in that Roman Catholic churchyard. So the soldiers sadly took their comrade's body back

and buried him just outside the fence of that cemetery. ²

The next day they came back to see that the grave was all right and to their astonishment could not find it. Search as they might they could find no trace of the freshly dug soil. As they were about to leave in bewilderment the priest came up. He told them that his heart had been troubled because of his refusal to allow their dead comrade to be buried in the churchyard; so, early in the morning, he had risen from his bed and with his own hands had moved the fence itself outward so that now it included the body of the soldier who had died for France.

Jesus' call for compassion will have you and I acting likewise.... moving fences.... breaking them open... freeing the captives of so many closed doors with the good news of the Gospels.... freeing them and freeing us to REJOICE in the never failing PROMISE and PRESENCE of God's abiding love. Amen.

¹ For an interesting comparison see how Blue Laws in the New Haven Colony reflect this same kind of development at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_laws

² From William Barclay, "Commentary on Ephesians"