

Isaiah 58:9b-14

Psalm 103:1-8

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

Time is moving too fast for many of us. The culture is changing faster than we can keep up. Things just aren't the way they used to be even for people who are pretty young yet. When the changes happen faster than we can process them, the temptation is to cling fast to the things we know.....to the things that are familiar bedrocks for us.....to things the way we remember them.....as best we can. This desire to cling to what's familiar shows up very often in the way we feel about church practices and worship liturgies.

The irony then, about following Jesus, is that he's one of the most powerful change agents that ever walked the earth. He turned his world upside down. And as we might expect, he met with quite a bit of resistance. The resistance that we know about was from the rich and powerful who happened to be the religious leaders of their day. But there were a fair number of ordinary folks who looked askance at Jesus as well. Who did he think he was challenging the keepers of the religious law? They were the ones who were charged with enforcing the ten commandments as they were given to Moses. Always there was the question, who is this upstart Jesus?

The gospel lesson this morning presents us with just this kind of conflict. The disagreement is between Jesus and the keepers of the law. So let's take a look first at the keepers of the law. They have been entrusted with a sacred duty.....to be sure that all the sons and daughters of Abraham, the chosen people, obeyed the laws that were given to them through Moses while they were in the desert. For God has said to Moses: "You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you; everyone who profanes it shall be put to death; whoever does any work on it shall be cut off from among the people. Therefore, the Israelites shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign forever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed." Exodus 31:14, 16-17 It wasn't only that individuals who ignored the Sabbath would jeopardize their own lives, but the very covenant between God and the chosen people would be placed in jeopardy. This was an awesome responsibility for the religious leaders of Israel. They couldn't allow anyone to put the chosen people at risk. The Sabbath was a day holy to the Lord, but it was also a day when people were to put down their burdens and rest themselves. It was a day given to them so that they could have respite from their work and be refreshed. It was a day set aside to give thanks to God, to honor God, but it was also a day that was given to them by God so that they could catch their breath. It was not just a tradition. It was a mandate from the Almighty.

Now Jesus knew all of this because he was entirely and thoroughly entrenched in the Jewish way of life. He was born into a Jewish family. The gospel of Luke goes into great detail confirming that Jesus was one of the chosen people, not someone who was an outside agitator. Luke records that he was circumcised on the eighth day and was named Jesus as the angel Gabriel had directed Mary. His parents took him to the Temple to present him to the Lord as it was written in the law of the Lord, "Every

firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord.” His parents took him every year thereafter to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. He read scripture in the Temple when he was twelve. And as a young man he was baptized by John the Baptist. And when he began his ministry he taught in local synagogues. He was a very good, law-abiding Jewish man, so he knew what the laws were. He knew the importance of them not only to each individual Jewish person, but to the chosen people as a whole.

And yet, on this particular occasion he chose to break one of the most sacred laws of Jewish tradition.....one of the laws that determined the rhythm of the life of an entire people. If you were Jewish, you didn't do any work on the Sabbath. The Romans may have worked on the Sabbath, but not the Jews. The sojourners and foreigners in their midst might have worked on the Sabbath, but not the Jews. This was not just a practice or a tradition. This was a sacred mandate from God and was part of Jewish identity.

But here we are, with Jesus, this itinerant Jewish rabbi, steeped in Jewish life and Jewish law himself choosing to ignore one of the most sacred of all the Jewish laws and rituals. For the religious leaders of the day, it was a scandal. Here was Jesus putting all of them at risk with Almighty God.....or so they thought. It's no wonder that they were outraged.....and probably frightened as well.....because they had let Jesus into the synagogue to teach and preach.

And as Jesus is preaching in this synagogue, there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and couldn't stand up straight. Today we might assume that she had severe osteoporosis. We don't know anything else about her. We don't know if she came to the synagogue weekly like everyone else or if she came because she had heard that Jesus, the healer, would be there. We don't know if she was welcomed and part of this community or if she was an outsider. We don't know if she had family caring for her or if she was struggling to survive alone. All we know is that when Jesus saw her, he had compassion for her and without hesitation simply said to her, “Woman you are set free from your ailment.” God is the divine agent here. Jesus is the conduit. When he put his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight. That was it. No theatrics. No request from her for healing. No pronouncement of faith on her part. Just Jesus with great compassion setting her free as only Jesus can. And in the process. Jesus reveals something about the compassionate and life-restoring nature of God.

He is immediately challenged by the leader of the synagogue. They viewed 'healing' as an act of work. Why can't she come back on one of the other six days when it's OK for Jesus or anyone else to do 'work'?

And Jesus has an answer. He calls them all hypocrites. Now none of us enjoy having someone point out to us that we are hypocrites and neither did the leaders of the synagogue. But Jesus doesn't stand on ceremony. He points out to them that they would rescue one of their animals on the Sabbath or give the animal water so it would be comfortable.....and that such acts are allowable exceptions to the law. Why in the world, then, is it not OK for Jesus to release a 'daughter of Abraham' from her imprisonment? Why is it not OK to rescue her? Why is it not OK to be sure that she is comfortable? Jesus has identified her as part of the community by calling her 'a daughter of Abraham.' But even if she were an outsider, why should she not get at least as thoughtful treatment as the animals? From Jesus' perspective, the Sabbath is a most appropriate time to release someone from captivity. Is that not part of the covenant between God and the children of Israel.....the release of the chosen people from the captivity in Egypt that is the cornerstone of the covenant between God and Israel? For Jesus, the

Sabbath is the perfect time for him to set someone free. Jesus chose to expand the community.....to draw this woman inside the circle of community.

So what is the message here for us? Do you suppose there are any rituals or traditions in our rules of faith that keep people bound? Do they keep people on the outside of our community instead of embracing them and freeing them up to be on the inside of our community? Have we made our rituals so exclusive that we keep people out? Do our rituals and traditions draw people in or keep them at bay? As we bring God's word and proclamation of love and forgiveness to life in our own communities, are we doing it in a way that sets people free? Or are we doing it in such a way that we keep people bound in their own pain and their own despair?

We have the most wonderful news in the world to share. We know that Jesus has set us free and that Jesus will set all who seek him free. We need to remember that when Jesus called the woman and asked her to come to him, she responded and she went to him. Do we encourage people to answer Jesus when he calls? Perhaps every single person who enters our doors on a Sunday morning is doing so because they are seeking Christ. They are here worshiping God with us and seeking an experience of Christ among us. Are we helping to make that happen for them or are we standing in the way? Are we part of the crowd that is applauding Jesus when he calls out the religious leaders of the day as hypocrites? Or are we one of the religious leaders of our day upholding our traditions and believing that we are honoring God and Christ by doing so even though we are actually putting up barriers between Christ and the one who seeks him?

These are all important questions that we need to be asking ourselves. The answers may not come to us quickly or be obvious, but it is worth it to us and to all who seek Christ through us to find the answers. As we move into our future.....the future that God has prepared for us.....we need always to be aware of how and when we gather people in. And even how and when.....even inadvertently..... we keep people out.

We don't have to be a barrier for anyone.....ever. Our litmus test for what to do may be as simple as deciding what is the compassionate response in any given situation. What is the kind response? When does it make more sense to break a rule than to keep it? When is it more loving to uphold the person in front of us rather than the rule that we've always followed? We don't have to be one of the hypocrites who believes that tradition and rituals are more important than the people they are designed to serve. Those rituals and traditions were originally established to honor God and to serve the people who seek God. They were not established so that the people could serve the rituals and traditions instead. For every practice that we hold dear and revere, we need to ask ourselves.....are we standing in the way of someone seeking Christ or are we opening up the way?

God works through us and among us. God guides us and shepherds us. With the help of God, we will be able to see when we should serve God's people and when we should uphold our traditions. If we ask, God will provide us with the answers and God will show us the way.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.