

Proper 16C 2019 SSP

Isaiah 58:9b-14; St. Luke 13:10-17

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath Day, says the Fourth Commandment. One of the charges leveled against Jesus by his enemies among his own Jewish people was that he was a Sabbath breaker. The Romans would not have cared about this, but Pontius Pilate needed to keep peace in Judah over which he was governor. So there were a number of dangerous items in these Sabbath charges.

One item came from an incident (Mt 12:1ff) when Jesus's disciples were criticized for picking and eating corn on a Sabbath day. However, as Jesus remarks in today's Gospel, most Jews allowed the untying of an ox or a donkey so it could be led to water. And today's incident has some serious drama which must have added fuel to the fire concerning Jesus and the Sabbath.

Jesus is teaching in a synagogue. A woman, who must have been a well-known presence, came to Jesus's attention. She had been bent over for eighteen years. She could not straighten herself. Both Jesus and Saint Luke attribute her ailment to a "spirit of infirmity," which in due course Jesus will further identify. Jesus called her, and said, "Woman, you are freed from your infirmity," and he laid his hands on her. Immediately she was made straight and praised God.

Now you would think, wouldn't you, that everyone would rejoice. Not so. The leader of the synagogue, not directly addressing Jesus who had been teaching, addresses the congregation. "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath Day." What are we to say to this?

Well Jesus said something, directly to the leader and his other critics. “You hypocrites!” He points out how they all let their animals loose on the Sabbath to feed and water. And then he puts the issue to them. “And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?” He places the suffering woman squarely within the covenant of grace, identifies her suffering as an affliction from Satan, and says her healing took place at exactly the right place and time – in a house of worship engaged in the holy Sabbath, where Jesus himself has been teaching. Jesus not only healed her; he honored her.

What is the Sabbath for? Rest and worship, surely. In the creation, God rested on the seventh day and blessed it as the Sabbath. God saw that his creation was, behold very good, and he celebrated that goodness on the seventh day. The prophets of Israel constantly upheld the Sabbath and opposed the selfish bending of the rules used by both leaders and people for their own interests.

Today, we heard the prophet Isaiah denounce the profaning of the Sabbath by selfishness. But we also heard him say that removing accusations and meeting the needs of the afflicted would make the sabbath a delight and a true honor to the Lord. No doubt the leader of the synagogue could cite rules and traditions to uphold his criticism of Jesus and the infirm woman. But how do we think the prophet Isaiah would have responded to this moment of grace? It was as though the ruler of the synagogue was offended by seeing the working of a miracle in his own church, oops, synagogue.

There is another aspect to this. Jesus was there then, not on some other day where he would have been elsewhere.

How does this Sabbath episode relate to us? I will confess to you and speak for myself as a priest. A big part of a priest's calling has to do with the ordering of worship. I am a believer in decency and order in worship – and that phrase comes from Saint Paul (let all things be done decently and in order). I am sure that Jesus loved decency and order as well, and that his conduct in the synagogue service was exemplary. But when he called and healed that poor woman he fulfilled the decency and order of the day. It was necessary for the purposes of the Sabbath and pertained to its reason for being. It was the synagogue ruler who introduced indecency and disorder. And Saint Luke does say that even Jesus's enemies were put to shame that day by what Jesus said to them, while the people rejoiced.

Nevertheless, do not doubt that this incident was yet another contributing item in the agenda against Jesus by those who had a fixed grudge against him. The grudge was so fixed that it blinded them to what was happening before their eyes – a wonder of God's grace.

It is this fixed grudge which bothers me. Am I sometimes so preoccupied with making worship go the right way, that I am missing out on the grace which worship is meant to celebrate? Week after week, here at Saint Stephen's and at countless other churches on the Lord's Day (Sunday, the Day of the Lord's Resurrection), we celebrate the holy mysteries of Jesus's sacrifice, death and resurrection. We use great reverence to handle the Sacrament of his body and blood. All this is excellent. But do I, do we, miss some things because of various obsessions and preoccupations? Is there anything about me, or within me, that bends me in the direction of that synagogue ruler?

I think the remedy is simple and deep. Get over yourself and pay attention to Jesus. In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.