

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
August 21, 2022 – 11 Pentecost
Luke 13:10-17
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

As we gather week by week and listen to portions of Luke's Gospel, we travel with Jesus and his disciples to Jerusalem and the cross. In today's lesson, we hear about a controversy between Jesus and the leader of a synagogue about the proper observance of religious law. We are getting a glimpse of the growing opposition between Jesus and certain Jewish religious leaders. This is important to understand because at the end of Jesus' journey some religious leaders will be accusing Jesus of blasphemy and insisting on his crucifixion as punishment.

"Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy." This is the fourth of the Ten Commandments. This commandment requires people to honor God by honoring the Sabbath day. It is the longest commandment of the ten. Listen to its full version as we find it in the book of Exodus (20:8-11). "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not do any work – you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it."

Because God blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it, God's people are meant to use the seventh day of the week to honor God. To keep the Sabbath day holy means to set it apart from common use. This includes refraining from work done for one's own purposes and benefit, as well as reserving the day for special purposes associated with God. At the time the commandment was recorded in the book of Exodus dedication to God was expressed by visits to sanctuaries and prophets, by special sacrifices and other activities in the Temple, and by recitation of certain psalms. The point of keeping the Sabbath day holy was and is to honor God our Creator.

In Jewish tradition many specific regulations about working on the Sabbath were derived from this commandment. But there were always exceptions to the regulations that were allowed. For instance, it was forbidden to use oxen for farm work on the Sabbath. But if a man's oxen fell into a ditch on the Sabbath, he was allowed to pull them out without violating the commandment.

Many of us have been taught some distinctions between Judaism and Christianity and between the Old and New Testaments that are misleading and unhelpful. We may have learned to think of Judaism as a religion centered on laws and strict rules about the details of human life. We may think of the "God of the Old Testament" as an angry God ready to condemn and punish people for breaking the laws and rules. We can certainly find texts in the Hebrew Bible to support these ideas. But we also find the words of the prophets trumpeting God's overarching messages to human beings: Love God. Love your neighbors as yourselves. Do justice. Love mercy. Care for the poor and needy.

Jesus taught and demonstrated these messages from God. He said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). This morning's lesson from the Gospel of Luke offers us a picture of Jesus the rabbi teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. He had set aside the day to go to a place where Jews were gathered to learn about God, and in this way Jesus was keeping the fourth commandment.

A crippled woman appeared before Jesus. He laid his hands on her and healed her. She began praising God for being set free from her ailment. We know from reading the gospels that this happened over and over again in Jesus' ministry. He taught about God, and he healed the sick. He spoke about God's love and mercy, and he demonstrated God's love and mercy as he restored people to wholeness. The two activities are completely in harmony.

"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.'" The religious leader was angry with Jesus because he had violated the law prohibiting work on the Sabbath, and he blamed the people for coming to Jesus to be cured on the Sabbath. In response to this anger, Jesus challenged his opponents with an argument. He reminds them that the law allows them to care for their animals on the Sabbath. So, since that is allowed, "ought not this woman ... be set free from bondage on the Sabbath day?" In a similar situation recorded elsewhere in Luke, Jesus had asked the religious leaders directly, "is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" (Luke 6:9). There is only one correct answer.

The issue of whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath is quite remote to us today. Certainly most 21st century Christians in the West would not object to someone going to the Emergency Room on a Sunday! But the fact that some religious people use their understanding of what is religiously correct to harm and exclude and hate others is certainly still with us.

Jesus knew what was in people's hearts. He was not fooled when people couched their ill will in pious terms. Jesus probed beneath the surface of human behavior and proclaimed what he discovered there. I think it would be difficult to exaggerate Jesus' critique of people who pretend to be good but are not good, people who use religion and religious practices to boost their self-righteousness and to judge others. Just as in Jesus' day, there are people today who insist on obedience to certain laws (e.g., regarding human sexuality) and who neglect what Jesus called "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (Matthew 23:23). Just as in Jesus' day, we in the church are often so focused on small matters that we fail to direct our attention and resources to more important matters and we fail to engage as fully as we can in carrying out Christ's work in the world.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). He challenges us to look into our hearts and to examine our behavior. We are religious people, members of the Christian community. We are called to build up the body of Christ – the church – and to spread the good news of Christ to the world. How are we doing? Do we remember, from Sabbath to Sabbath, that love and compassion and mercy and healing are most important in God's sight? Do we recall that kindness is of much more value than correctness in our worship practices? Do we allow ourselves to be overly concerned with what will pass away and be forgotten? Do we judge others? Do we guard our speech? I recently came across this good advice about speech from Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam: only speak what is true, kind, and necessary. Similar advice is found in the Letter to the Ephesians (4:14-16): "We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

Jesus calls each of us and all of us to live in love. With our hearts fixed on God, may we answer his call with a joyous "yes." In Jesus' name. Amen.