

The leader of the synagogue is upset that Jesus is healing someone on the Sabbath. Is he really all that concerned with protecting a day set aside to worship God? Or is there a hidden agenda in why he acts the way he acts?

This week marked the 90th anniversary of something of significance. Who can tell me what that is?

90 years ago this past week women in the United States received the right to vote with the passage of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution. Was that a good thing? I'm looking forward to the time I have an equal vote in my marriage!!

The battle for women to win the right to vote actually began 70 years before. And according to Gail Collins in an article she wrote, it is a story that contains everything: Adventure! Suspense! Treachery! Drunken legislators!

This is a story which gives witness to how, "behind almost every great moment in history, there are heroic people doing really boring and frustrating things for a prolonged period of time.

The effort to win the right to vote for women involved 56 referendum campaigns directed at male voters, plus 480 campaigns to get Legislatures to submit suffrage amendments to voters, 47 campaigns to get constitutional conventions to write woman suffrage into state constitutions; 277 campaigns to get State party conventions to include woman suffrage planks, 30 campaigns to get presidential party campaigns to include woman suffrage planks in party platforms and 19 campaigns with 19 successive Congresses. It obviously did not happen overnight.

The constitutional amendment that finally did pass Congress bore the name of Susan B. Anthony. The bill came up before the House of Representatives in 1918 with the two-thirds votes needed for passage barely within reach.

One congressman who had been in the hospital for six months had himself carted to the floor so he could support suffrage. Another, who had just broken his shoulder, refused to have it set for fear he'd be too late to be counted. One NY Representative had been at the bedside of his dying wife but left at her urging to support the cause. He provided the final, crucial vote, and then returned home for her funeral.

The Senate failed to follow suit. But President Woodrow Wilson, a president who listened to persistent women, pushed the amendment through the next year. The states started ratifying. Then things stalled just one state short of success."

Ninety years ago this month, all eyes turned to Tennessee, the only state yet to ratify with its Legislature still in session. The resolution sailed through the Tennessee Senate. As it moved on to the House, however, it faced opposition. And what influenced the House members to oppose this legislation?

Anyone want to take a stab at what industry in Tennessee fought aggressively against the right for women to vote?

The vocal opposition came from the liquor industry. The liquor industry was pretty sure that if women got the right to vote, they'd use it to pass Prohibition and outlaw alcohol. Distillery lobbyists came to the statehouse to fight and they came bearing gifts for the legislators. That's right. They came bearing lots of free samples of alcohol. As a result, many of the legislators got drunk as they debated the bill.

The women and their allies knew they had a one-vote margin of support in the House. Then the speaker, whom they had counted on as a "yes," changed his mind. Suddenly, Harry Burn, the youngest member of the House, a 24-year-old "no" vote from East Tennessee, got up and announced that he had received a letter from his mother telling him to "be a good boy and vote "yes."

"I know that a mother's advice is always the safest for a boy to follow," Burn said, switching sides. With his vote, women gained the right to vote.

Clearly this is a story where a group of people wanted to maintain a rule because they would benefit financially from the keeping of that rule. They fought hard against changing that rule because they feared that if the rules were changed and women were allowed the right to vote, then liquor would be outlawed. Half of the American population was denied the right to vote in order to keep an industry in power.

In the story we read from out of Luke, Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem when he steps into a synagogue in Samaria. Jesus does not just focus on the powerful ones in the room. His attention is drawn to a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 long years. She could not stand up straight so that all that she saw was the ground just beneath her. She could not see the world around her. Her world was narrowed only to what was beneath her.

There are three stories in the gospel of Luke where Jesus heals on the Sabbath. In the other two the ones healed are very passive. The men healed do not speak, they are only identified by their infirmity, and then they disappear. But here we have the story of a woman who is healed and responds by praising God.

After Jesus heals this woman, the story turns from a story of praise and excitement to one of accusation. "There are six days to work," Jesus is told, "you can heal on those 6 days. But do not heal on the Sabbath."

But Jesus challenges them. Do you not water your donkey on the Sabbath he asks? Is this woman not a child of Abraham? Should the rules keep this woman from experiencing freedom? The opposition is silenced and the followers of Jesus rejoice.

Rules are important. We all know that. We need to have good and sound rules in order to function well as a society. Nothing is more frustrating than playing a game where there are no rules or the rules are not followed. But are there times when rules should be questioned? Are there times when rules should be broken?

Golfers here are aware of what happened last weekend. A SC golfer playing in the PGA golf Championship named Dustin Johnson did not realize that he was in a sand trap when he was playing the last hole. He just thought it was a sandy place where the crowd had been standing. As a result, he placed his club on the ground behind the ball which is breaking a rule of golf. He was assessed a 2 stroke penalty and denied the opportunity to play in a playoff.

So how do we know if a rule is just or not? How do we know if we should ever break a rule? If we read this passage of Scripture, then Jesus gives us some very clear guidelines of how to interpret the rules. If rules lead to someone's freedom being held back or someone is allowed to continue in a state of pain, then the rule is not what is important. Jesus saw beyond the rule and saw someone trapped and in need and he reached out and healed them.

I faced this situation as a hospital chaplain 20 years ago. Malcolm had AIDS and he was on the floor I was assigned to cover. Malcolm contracted AIDS from a life of drugs and promiscuous activity. This was 1990 and knowledge of AIDS was still in its infancy. Society told me to stay away from people like Malcolm. Society told me to judge him as a lesser person than me.

But I read the Bible and I read stories like this one we read of Jesus reaching out to people like Malcolm and offering them healing. As so I visited Malcolm. And Malcolm taught me a lot. Malcolm taught me important things about life and ultimately about death. But I had to follow Jesus and overcome my fear and seek out and minister to him and be ministered unto by him.

There are others today that need to be reached out to with the love of God. I met a prison chaplain this week in Columbia who told me that our area here in York County needs a halfway house for released prisoners who need to be re-connected to the community. He said there is grant money if someone would just take the initiative and get it going. Do we reach out and offer healing to released prisoners or are we too scared?

I read this passage yesterday in Paul Wilkinson's room at the VA Hospital and reflected on the person in the bed next to Paul with PTSD. Do we reach out to returning soldiers with mental illness who are not easy to be around or are we too scared?

Who else do you see in our society that fear prevents us Christians from reaching out to? Who is in the shadows that is being overlooked that you feel a tug toward but you also feel your own fear because there are rules somewhere that give you an excuse to ignore them?

Jesus came upon a woman in pain and bondage. Jesus healed her on the Sabbath. The church leaders were scared that Jesus was changing the rules.

Are we going to overcome our fear and reach out like Jesus did?

Are we going to allow fear to prevent us from really following Jesus? AMEN.

-Collins, Gail, "My Favorite August," NY Times, August 13, 2010

-Text: Luke 13: 10-17

-Given: August 20, 2010 in Allison Creek Presbyterian Church (York, SC)