

Earlier we read from Exodus from the Old Testament. That text was part of the 10 Commandments about remembering the Sabbath and keeping it holy. Jesus knew the Jewish laws very well. In the text that we will be reading next, Jesus is teaching on the Sabbath and he has a crowd listening to him. That is when an interruption to his teaching occurs.

Read Luke 13:10-17

According to author Wil Willimon, the world as we know it shifted on a Sunday evening in 1963 in Greenville, SC. The world changed dramatically that year in Greenville, SC because that was the year that the Fox Theatre opened on Sunday. Willimon says that he joined six of his friends, regular attenders of the Methodist Youth Fellowship at the Buncombe Street United Methodist Church, in making a pact. That night the teenagers entered the front door of the church to be seen and then quietly slipped out the back door and joined John Wayne at the Fox.

Do other older folks like me remember similar types of behaviors on a Sunday? I saw my first R rated movie, Animal House, on a Sunday evening with youth from my church.

Willimon says that on that Sunday night in 1963 there would be no more free passes for the church. According to him, the Fox Theatre went head to head with the church over who would provide the worldview for the young and on that night the Fox Theatre won.

In reflecting on the experience, Willimon says that their parents never worried about whether or not they would grow up Christian. The church was the only show in town. On Sundays, the town closed down. One could not even buy a gallon of gas.

In taking a child to Sunday School, parents affirmed everything that was good, wholesome, reasonable, and American. Church, home, and state formed a national consortium that instilled Christian values.

I remember as a child being able to go into the Piggly Wiggly grocery store on Sundays in Columbia after church. All of the aisles were open for shopping but for one. The grocery store aisle with the hardware items like rakes and hoses was cordoned off. Those were items of “work” and the South Carolina blue laws did not approve of work on Sundays. Legislators in Columbia were the ones in charge of deciding which day we were to observe Sabbath and what we could and could not purchase.

Many of us today remember those times fondly while many of us today have no clue of what I am talking about. Some of us remember being forbidden from playing cards, or going to movies, or doing any type of shopping on Sunday. Others of us here today, however, have Sunday games, parties, lake adventures, Carowinds, golf, shopping, and other events. In other words, the way we decide to maintain Sabbath is no longer dictated by legislators in Columbia. We are now given much more freedom.

Of course, Biblical Sabbath occurs on what day? Saturday. Saturday was considered the 7th day in the Hebrew or Old Testament Scriptures and Jesus and his followers maintained a Saturday Sabbath. It was not until the 4th Century when Constantine became the Holy Roman Emperor did the Sabbath move from Saturday to Sunday.

Constantine converted to Christianity and forced his soldiers to convert to Christianity. But the soldiers were pagan and they worshipped the sun on Sunday. So to appease the soldiers and to also break with Judaism, Constantine and these early Christians adopted Sunday as the new day of Sabbath.

In our second Scripture today, Jesus is teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And just then there appears a woman with a spirit that has crippled her for 18 years. She is bent over and quite unable to stand up. Jesus sees her and invites her over to him. Why does he notice her? Were there others like her? We don't know.

But she does not approach Jesus. He calls out to her. She comes near him and Jesus recognizes that this spirit has kept her in bondage. “You are set free,” he tells her. He then lays his hands on her.

Jesus doesn't do any type of hocus pocus. Nothing dramatic. He simply lays his hands on her. Immediately we are told she stands up straight and walks.

The religious leaders are furious. Not surprisingly they place the blame for this on the woman. They yell something about not coming to the synagogue on the Sabbath for healing. But she did not seek Jesus for healing. He sought her.

And why did Jesus not wait another day to bring healing to her? She had been suffering from this ailment for 18 years. Another day would not have killed her. But Jesus does not wait another day. He heals her on the Sabbath. What point was he trying to make? Was he just trying to stick it to the religious authorities?

Jesus clearly shows he is not going to be limited by human rules and laws. Even laws and rules made in good faith. Jesus clearly challenges rules and laws that hamper people from coming to experience the good news of God's love. If rules and laws restrict people from experiencing God's love, grace, and mercy then those rules and laws are not that important.

So what does it mean for us today to keep Sabbath and keep it holy? Some people think that this means following certain rules and regulations. And for some these rules and regulations can provide a sense of comfort and security. And as long as following these rules for you is not hampering others from experiencing God's good news then that is fine.

But for Jesus in the story we just read, keeping Sabbath means being engaged in helping the needs of the people around him. Jesus reached out to the woman who had been bent over for 18 years, touched her, and released her from her bondage.

For us, keeping Sabbath means that we pay attention and reflect on what we can do for the needs around us. Needs such as the Syrian child rescued from a bomb and sitting without emotion in an ambulance.

For us keeping Sabbath means that we pay attention and reflect on what we can do to assist the school children in our area who do not have the supplies that they need to be successful in school. For us keeping Sabbath means that we pay attention and reflect on what we can do for the families flooded out in Louisiana.

I hear people sometimes say that they want to come to church to escape the problems in the world or the rapid changes around them. But if you want to escape the needs and issues in the world then you should join some type of exclusive club but not a church. We in the church should keep and honor the Sabbath by keeping our eyes open to the needs around us and listening to how God wants us to respond.

Today all of us are invited to the communion table. There are no rules here to block anyone from coming. All are invited. All are invited to be fed and then to keep and honor the Sabbath by being open to the needs around us. AMEN.

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-Hauerwas, Stanley and William Willimon, Resident Aliens: A provocative Christian assessment of culture and ministry for people who know that something is wrong, Abingdon Press, 1989.

-Given: August 21, 2016 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)