

Deuteronomy 5:12-15 ~ Luke 13:10-17

Today, You Are Set Free

11th Sunday after Pentecost

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

Introduction to Gospel Text

2004: Eighteen years ago. Think for a moment, where were you in 2004? Some of you weren't even born yet. But *most* of us in this sanctuary were already full-fledged adults by then. 2004 was the year that Facebook was invented. And it was still three years before Steve Jobs revealed the very first iPhone. 2004 was the year *before* "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" would come out. Yes: only in movie theaters on the big screen. Why am I taking us on a trip down memory lane to 2004? Because that was eighteen years ago. So, where were you and what were you doing, how were you feeling back in 2004?

I am not suggesting this little mental exercise to make you feel old. Or young. I asked you because that is how long the woman in our gospel story had been suffering from a debilitating ailment. We can't know what caused her to be bent over. All we know about this woman is what we have in Luke's story you are about to hear (and see). And it isn't much. This story leaves us with way more questions than answers about this woman. What we do know is that she had been physically crippled for eighteen years bending her spine so badly that she could not stand up straight.

She appears in the synagogue on the sabbath. Probably right where she went every sabbath as a practicing Jew would. That's why Jesus was also there that day, in the role of Rabbi Jesus, teaching those who had gathered for worship. Honoring the sabbath, the holy day of rest, was central to obeying God's law for all faithful Jews.

You may recall last Sunday, we were just a few verses back in Luke 12, when Jesus was all fired up, telling the crowd that he had come to bring division, not peace. He even called them, "You hypocrites!" Get ready, we're going to hear that epithet again. And *again*, it has something do to with misinterpreting the totality God's law of Love. Given that this woman did not *ask* to be healed, it kind of makes you wonder if Jesus maybe seized that moment not only free the woman from her ailment, but *also* to vividly drive home the lesson he was teaching them regarding the hypocrisy that so alarmed him.

Sermon

She almost didn't go that day. She could hardly drag herself out of bed that morning. Just turning over in bed was getting harder and harder. But that was what she had done all night long: first one side, then the other, trying to get comfortable in her body that was so bent. When the first light of the morning started to lift the veil of darkness, she thought to herself: Today is the sabbath. Our holy day of rest.

She loved the Sabbath: A day to reset and remember how God freed her people when they were slaves in Egypt. But honestly, today, rest seemed as far away as the friends and family who had drifted out of her life as this illness grabbed her and would not let her go. It started slowly at first. She could hide the changes in her body, until she couldn't. The worse it got the more alone she felt. No one else in her village had this crippling illness. She had no rest from herself. No day-off from the scary, dark thoughts that haunted her. No sabbath from the pain, the shame, the turned heads, the people pretending not to notice. Not even a day of freedom from that.

But still, the sabbath was the sabbath. Even for her. It was their sacred day of rest, ordained by God from the beginning of time for her people, God's chosen people of Israel. She liked the way her scriptures started out by saying the reason for the sabbath was because God rested on the seventh day of creation, as the story was told in Genesis. But God, being God, didn't leave it there. The holy scriptures added another and different reason *after* the Exodus. After that pivotal event, practicing the sabbath every week help them remember how God had set them free. Being free from work, whether it was the work of a woman, or a man, the work of a slave, or an alien, even the ox and the donkey, everyone got a chance for a reset. It was written into God's law in Deuteronomy. A day where their given social role was lifted. Once a week.

But, it was even more than that. The sabbath was like breathing for them. It was a part of the rhythm of their life that helped them to know who they were. She knew in her head that she was one of God's chosen. Nothing could change that. But her heart wondered. Her heart was burdened. That morning as she lay in bed, she thought to herself, "Why even go to the synagogue? The same teachers saying the same things. Honestly, those Rabbis do go on and on. Beautiful words, but even the scriptures seemed so distant, so unable to touch the knot of pain and isolation so deep in her heart.

She almost didn't go that day. That morning was a bad one, after such a rough night. Getting dressed was a difficult chore. None of her clothes fit the way they used to. And the looks out on the streets. She could feel them, even without seeing them. Why bother. But she knew she needed rest. Real rest from the loneliness, the dull knot in her gut which had become her only constant companion. Something to push back her self-doubt and shame. She was not born to be bent over. Why her? What had she done to deserve this. So many unanswered questions taunted her.

So, she *did* go. She made her way to the synagogue. The service was well underway when she arrived. She timed it that way intentionally so she could just slip in the back to minimize the gawking stares, or the awkward attempts well intended people made at "fixing her." But just as she slipped in the back, came the voice, the different voice. Unlike she had ever hear before. He was not calling to her in judgment or scorn. This was a voice she had been longing to hear; and those eyes which looked at her soul, trapped and bound for eighteen years. He didn't ask questions, nor did he hesitate. It was almost as if he could feel her pain and knew she couldn't take it any longer. He looked into her eyes and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

First the voice, then the eyes and then the touch. No one had touched her for so very long. But with his touch, all of a sudden, she could stand up straight, she felt so tall, like she could touch the sky. It all happened so fast, it hardly seemed real. She didn't know how, but right then and there knew she was healed. Right there on the sabbath, of all days. It seemed absolutely right to her. She began to sing and shout, praising God. Awesome God. She, a daughter of Abraham, had been freed that day, like her foremothers and fathers in Egypt. The whole crowd in the synagogue was singing and shouting and praising God, too.

But not everyone. Through the praising and rejoicing she could hear an angry voice. It was the head honcho of the synagogue. He and the other leaders were fuming, indignant. Jesus had broken the law in their eyes. According to their literal interpretation of sabbath laws. Ironically, Jesus had some healing to do for them that day, too. Those leaders were not physically bent over like the woman, but their narrowing reading of the law had begun to cripple their spirit. They were beginning to lose sight of what the sabbath was all about. They were not considering bigger picture, the totality of God's law.

What Jesus had done was *not* a violation of the *Halakha*, the Hebrew word for the collective body of God's law that supersedes and runs through all the others: the law of Love. Loving God and neighbor with all our hearts and souls and minds. Every day of the week. Yes, the sabbath had to do with rest. With stopping business as usual for one day in the week. But the *reason* for stopping was to help them and to help us to reset. A day to attune our spirits with the one who is all about setting us free to love one another and ourselves.

Setting us free from the ways of sin, free from all that binds and cripples our spirits and minds. Jesus was not breaking the law that day, he was fulfilling it. As he was making his way to the cross, to suffer and die for our sins. To set us free to begin again. As it turned out, that day was the last day Jesus would ever set his human, dusty, calloused feet in a synagogue. The Sabbath day the woman who had suffered for eighteen long years, almost didn't go.