

“What Better Day?”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

¹⁰Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But 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.” ¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?” ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

~o~

One of the things I miss most about how I grew up is the way our family did Sundays—Sunday Dinner, to be precise. Sure, we were up early on Sundays to be at Sunday School by 9 a.m. and we stayed for worship at 10 a.m., but our minister was a boring preacher and it’s what happened after all that that I miss the most. We’d get home and Dad would roll up his sleeves and mom would put on her blue floral apron and we’d get to work. If the smells of pot roast hadn’t already hit our noses when we walked in the door, that was because Mom was making fried chicken or Dad was doing French Toast. It wouldn’t be long before those mouthwatering smells filled the house.

We often had extras over for Sunday Dinner—folks from church or family members. And sometimes we went to Grandma and Grandpa’s house for Sunday Dinners replete with pressed table cloths and the good china. Sunday afternoons were lazy times of conversation, play, or napping. Then it was back to church for services and afterwards, the perfunctory supper of Spam and cheese and crackers. Those were good days, but it’s the Sunday Dinners I miss most. How about you? How did you spend the Sundays of your past or how do you spend them now? It’s not a rhetorical question—tell your neighbor! Spend a couple of minutes sharing about your Sunday traditions.

-allow 2-3 minutes for conversation-

Thanks for reminiscing with me and with one another. Sundays really did used to look different. Stores were closed, children’s sports and school activities were suspended, and alcohol sales were prohibited. Sunday was a day for rest, for family, and for the religious, for worship—but why? “Remember the Sabbath, and keep it holy,” say the Ten Commandments from the book of Exodus. And so, in different ways, we have and we continue to do so.

Jesus and his friends had a habit of getting in trouble on the Sabbath. Four times, in Luke’s gospel, they find themselves in hot water with the authorities for violating Sabbath laws. Today’s reading is one of them. Jesus was teaching in a local synagogue one Sabbath day when a woman appeared. She was bent with illness, able only to look at the ground beneath her or to strain her neck for a sideways glance. She couldn’t meet Jesus’ eyes, but he saw her and he called her to him, told her that today she was free of her ailment, and he laid his hands on her. Luke’s account says that she immediately straightened up and began praising God. The synagogue leader believed that Jesus was breaking Sabbath laws by healing people and so, possibly to discourage others from presenting themselves to Jesus for healing, he said, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.” Was the synagogue leader really wrong? His complaint is, on the surface, a faithful reading of the Torah, the Jewish scripture: the seventh day was set aside by God for Israel’s rest, and work was prohibited on the Sabbath.

Jesus never rejects the ruling of the Torah about work on the Sabbath. He does, however, point out that certain kinds of work, like watering a donkey, are allowed. Then he goes on to remind his audience that this woman, a daughter of Abraham, had been bound by her affliction for 18 long years. “What better day to heal—to bring freedom—than on the Sabbath?” he asks. Should she really have to wait one more day? Luke’s author tells us that the crowds indeed side with Jesus and the synagogue leader is humiliated publicly.

In his sermon on this text, one of my seminary professors, Dr. Matthew Skinner, draws a striking parallel between this story and the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1964 Dr. King published the book, *Why We Can’t Wait*, which includes his now famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” The “Letter” issues a call for urgency and was written as a response to eight local white clergymen. The clergymen had criticized King’s activities in Birmingham and appealed for a more patient and restrained approach to lobbying for civil rights. The “Letter” expresses King’s deep disappointment with “the white moderate,” who “paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom.” The primary argument of the “Letter” still speaks today. In fact, as we hear in our reading from Luke, that basic argument spoke long before King came along.¹

While Jesus never disparaged his followers from observing the Sabbath, he clearly didn’t consider healing people on the Sabbath a violation of its intention. Earlier in Luke’s gospel, he healed a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath and after today’s episode he will go on to heal a man with dropsy on the Sabbath. When confronted with illness or brokenness or bondage, Jesus knew that today, the Sabbath day or Sunday or any other day, is always the day to bring healing and wholeness and freedom. That’s why he responds to the synagogue leader’s critique with these words: “ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” Hasn’t she waited long enough? That’s why Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. responded to the inaction of those white clergymen with deep disappointment in those who “paternalistically [believe they] can set the timetable for another [human’s] freedom.” Hadn’t African American people waited long enough?

¹ Matthew L. Skinner. “Why We Can’t Wait,” Day1.org, August 15, 2016, http://day1.org/7456-on_scripture_why_we_cant_wait_luke_131017_by_matthew_l_skinner.

When confronted with illness or brokenness or bondage—when confronted with suffering, today is always the day to bring healing and wholeness and freedom. That’s what King believed. That’s what Jesus believed. And that’s what those of us who identify as Christians are called to believe. What better day than today?

“The anonymous woman's oppression led Jesus to act on the Sabbath. The oppression of a whole segment of society led King to press forward. Whose similar circumstances demand urgency today? Who are the people whose rights are at risk, only one legislative action away from having their whole lives upended? Who are unable to get a fair shake? Who experiences fear on a regular basis? Who has been forgotten behind bars?”² Who are the bent and broken people in our world today? When we hear about them on the news, see them on the streets, or meet them face to face, what will we do?

As we go forth from this place, may we remember that when confronted with illness or brokenness or bondage—when confronted with suffering, today, is always the day to bring healing and wholeness and freedom. What better day than today? May it be so. Amen.

² Ibid.