

“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 to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. “

These are the words in Exodus 20:8-10. These are the words that the leader of the synagogue had in mind when he rebuked Jesus for healing the bent-over woman. It is one of the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses – the basis for all of the laws of the Jewish faith – and this leader took those laws seriously. Of course, he took them seriously! It was his job to do so – and to guide the people in following those laws as well.

What a confusing day for those folks. They had just witnessed a miraculous healing – not out on the street or on a hillside, but right there in their place of worship. If God is going to heal someone, what better place? What better time than when God’s chosen people were gathered together for worship? They began to sing praises, to celebrate the goodness and mercy of God... and then they were shut down by their leader because in the letter of the law, this kind of “work” was not permitted on the sabbath. By healing this woman on the sabbath, Jesus was breaking the Jewish law.

We look at this and say that the leader is out to lunch. He is not looking at the big picture. He is not making sense. However, if we step into his shoes for a moment, perhaps we can understand where he is coming from. The Jewish people were intent on pleasing God. They wanted to be sure to do everything right. They followed the Ten Commandments meticulously and didn’t want to make any mistakes. The leaders of the faith studied those ten laws carefully and clarified them for the people. By Jesus’ time, they had been “simplified” to 613 regulations!

From our point of view, the leader of the synagogue was so focussed on the details that he missed God’s intent for this commandment.

We look at that and say that he was being ridiculous. This woman had been bent over for 18 years! She hadn’t been able to look anyone in the eye or see anything but the ground and objects in her limited peripheral vision. “How could he be so unfeeling as to wish the woman hadn’t been healed?” But that wasn’t what he wished really – he just didn’t want it happening on that day. There were six other days on which it would be perfectly fine for Jesus to do this work... “Not today. Come back tomorrow.” ... In many ways, his vision was as limited as the bent-over woman’s.

I think we can all see places where this still happens today – where the intent of a law gets overlooked because we are distracted by the details. We call it “missing the forest for the trees”.

I became a single parent when my kids were in elementary school. I went back to school myself and was left juggling before and after school care, maintaining a rural property – including feeding the wood stoves that heated the house – keeping my homework up to date and spending quality time with the kids and making sure they were ok in this new reality. I wanted life to be as normal for them as possible. One of the routines we had was packing our lunches together after dinner. The rule was “something from every food group before you pack a treat”. On the particular night I am thinking of, we got to the “pack a treat” part when my son lamented, “No cookies – again?!” ... Well, I lost it. I tried to explain how hard I was working and that I just didn’t have time this week to bake. I was so tired and so stressed that I burst into tears.

“Mom,” he said gently, “You could just buy some.”

Such a simple solution – but in my struggle to do everything right, I missed the forest for the trees.

I think that’s what happened to that poor synagogue leader in our story. He was so focussed on doing everything exactly right that he lost sight of what God intended with that commandment.

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I like to think that perhaps God made that rule for our own good. Taking a sabbath day gives us a chance to rest and to recharge. It helps us to achieve some balance in our hectic and stressful lives. It frees us. Just like the woman in the story was bound by her infirmity, and the synagogue leader was bound by the man-made rules attached to God’s commandment, we are often bound by crippling influences in our lives. The rush to get everything done, to make enough money, to create the perfect life...

Do you remember when everything was closed on Sunday? No stores were open, no movie theatres... No one would have thought to schedule a soccer practice or a swim meet on a Sunday. The only people who had to go to work were those who provided essential care – hospital workers, fire, police and ambulance personnel... sure, it was a little frustrating from time to time but for the most part it meant that we spent time with our families. A vast majority of those families went to church together and then, perhaps, visiting with friends or relatives in the afternoon – and there was always Sunday Dinner, when the whole family sat down to eat a special meal together.

There’s a lot to be said for that sanctioned day of rest...

We spend a lot of time these days worrying about our youth and the frightening influences out there in the world. We spend a lot of time talking about the stress of juggling work and family... We spend a lot of time in the church worrying about declining numbers and ways to attract young families... With everything else happening in their lives, few young families have the time to go to church. Few have the time to take any kind of a sabbath moment, let alone a sabbath day.... and I think, if we take a look around our society today, it shows.

I feel very strongly that people need the opportunity to find that balance... that people need the opportunity to rest, to recharge, and to reconnect.

In today's story, Jesus didn't argue that the sabbath wasn't necessary. His argument was that the synagogue leader had misconstrued its purpose. Jesus didn't see it as a magic formula, full of detailed restrictions and taboos, that would please God and secure a spot in heaven. Jesus saw the underlying value of this sabbath time.

In the eyes of the synagogue leader, healing – and even seeking healing – was “work”. There were six other days available for this. “Not today – come back tomorrow.” But this day – this holy sabbath day was the day that everything was in place for just this healing. The bent-over woman had made her way to the synagogue – not in search of healing... she didn't ask for it... but for community and for worship. She was there, Jesus was there, compassion was there... the power of the Spirit was there in everyone present.

It was good to be there – on this particular day, at this particular moment in time.

It wasn't just a day to rest. It was a day to worship in community.

It will come as no surprise to you that I think that's something that's missing for a lot of people today. Church, after all is where I have put my passion and my effort... It's more than a career choice, more even than a calling – although that is an important part of my choice to follow this path. It is something I find necessary. It's crucial to making my life fulfilling.

Church is where I take *intentional* time to connect with my spiritual side – and let's face it, when life gets hectic, spirituality is of the first things to be set aside.

Church is where I take *intentional* time to connect with God. It's not that I don't do this at other times during the week but I can tell you that there is something powerful about the lighting of the Christ Candle at the beginning of the service. It reminds me that Jesus is in the house!

Church is where I hear messages of love... of forgiveness... and of hope... all such important messages these days! Every time I turn on the radio or the tv or even check in to the internet, I am faced with so many difficult stories – wars, children being kept in cages in the US, serial killers hiding in the bush of northern Manitoba, anti-LGBTQ groups interrupting a story time for children right here in Bells Corners, words of hate and intolerance being painted on buildings or shouted in the street... I need to come here – on Sunday... I need to hear those messages of

love and forgiveness, and hope – otherwise, it would be easy to lose all perspective. I need to be empowered to be part of the change so desperately needed.

Church is where I come to connect with you... this caring community, this family of faith - this community that comes together to experience the presence of God *with* each other – and *in* each other.

It is good to be here!

Did you notice that my list hasn't included any of the tradition and ritual that is such an important part of what we do here? Interesting... especially since I have told you in the past how much that tradition and ritual mean to me. I love it! I love the candles and the prayers and the music. The sacraments of communion and baptism can bring me to tears – and let's not even talk about the Christmas Eve service! They connect me to the past – my own past experience and the experiences of all those who have gathered together to make sense of it all over the centuries – right back to those folks sitting in the synagogue with Jesus. Yes, I believe traditions and rituals are important - but the problem comes when their importance outweighs the other reasons for being here together. When it comes to priorities, it's important to remember that relationships will trump rituals every time – at least that's how I see it. Relationships are what this is all about. My relationship with God, my relationship with the world, and my relationship with you.

This is where the disconnect is in the synagogue that morning, I think. The leader is so focussed on keeping things proper that he misses the presence of God.

Jesus, on the other hand, is completely engaged with the people in front of him. He is teaching – and still very connected to everyone present. He *sees* the woman... He *speaks* to her... and he *touches* her.

“I know you are here.”

“I love you.”

“You are important.”

Healing messages... liberating messages...empowering messages...

The messages she may never have heard if she wasn't in the synagogue on that sabbath day, surrounded by her supportive and caring community.

These are the kind of messages we all need.

The kind of messages that make us stand up straight.

The kind of messages that free us to see the world beyond what is happening at our feet.

The kind of messages that empower us to be the change needed in that world.

The kind of messages we all need to give each other.

The kind of messages that I hope you find here.

The kind of messages you take with you out into the world.

Take a page from Jesus' book – he's the perfect example to follow...

Take time for sabbath and take time to connect with others in the kind of community that fills you with the strength and energy you need to see you through the next week and that inspires you to be God's compassion in the world...

And wherever you are, when you see someone who is hurting, walk over to that person, encourage them by speaking to them, and then give them the kind of hug that lets them know they've just experienced a little bit of God's love.

Hallelujah!

Amen.