

Isaiah 58: 9b-14  
Psalm 103: 1- 14  
Luke 13: 10-17

Bound and Free  
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Someday I think I'd like to see that someone had written a history of posture and gesture. The ways people work and play, their daily activities, their local cultures – all create a set of easily recognizable postures. In ancient times, we would have seen the repeated motion of the woman with a drop spindle, or grinding grain, or a man with a scythe. In recent years, here is one that has become quite common – (*stand with head down, looking at a cell phone*). Do you recognize it? I see this as people walk down the street, at meetings, at meals, even...in church! People are bent over, looking down at a small screen that offers them connection, communication, entertainment: a whole life is there, on their phone. I worry about this sometimes – mostly that they will trip as they walk along, or step out in front of my car.

Don't get me wrong: I own a phone, which is not quite a smart phone, but smarter than me, I think. I could use it to check my e-mail and to look things up on the internet, though I rarely do. I am probably more attached to my laptop. But all of these wonderful devices bring up the question: in what ways do we benefit from the wonderful time-saving freedom and connection that is offered in owning them? And in what ways do we suffer from our insatiable need for and devotion to those forms of saving time and being constantly connected?

You might be wondering why I bring this up here and now, after today's readings from Scripture. It is because I am thinking of Sabbath and of freedom. Of rest and of activity. The Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote, 'A being is free only when it can determine and limit its activity.' A bit of a paradox: putting freedom and limits together like that. And yet, this is what people of faith have pondered for thousands of years. And for people of the Hebrew tradition, this has been expressed by the sacred practice of Sabbath.

The commandment to keep the Sabbath holy is found in the Ten Commandments. But, as many of you know, there are two versions of the Ten Commandments, and two different reasons are given for keeping the Sabbath holy. In the version from the book of Exodus, people (and their slaves, and their animals, and the foreigners in their towns) are commanded to rest because God rested on the seventh day of creation. We are to imitate God by separating out this day as different, and, by imitation, we too might come close to God's holiness. But in the book of Deuteronomy, we are told to rest in remembrance of the liberation of the Hebrews from slavery. No longer were they bound into servitude, forced to work day in and day out for others. They were free, and the Sabbath was the sign of this.

It is wonderful to have two reasons for doing something... and problematic, as well. Interpreting what was and was not work, what was and was not rest, what was and was not holy, became a major concern. We hear the prophet Isaiah preach about the hypocrisy of those who follow the rules strictly when it comes to outward displays of piety, but ignore the needs of the oppressed, the hungry and the homeless. He speaks of undoing the things of the yoke, and breaking the yoke – clearly he is on the liberation side of biblical interpretation.

In the first century, the debate continued, and Jesus famously confronted the religious leadership about the meaning of Sabbath. This is not because he wanted to discontinue the practice of a holy seventh day – far from it. He wanted to break those yokes and set the oppressed free, and the holiness of this task made it a perfect Sabbath day activity.

Christians have often used Gospel passages about Pharisees and synagogue leaders to feel a little superior. “Those narrow minded people,” we think. But remember recent polls show that the younger generation uses words like close-minded, moralistic, judgmental and fanatical for **Christians**. I don’t want to rush too quickly to judge the synagogue leader in our Gospel story. He was trying to be faithful in his own way. He had found ways to limit his activity that gave him a sense of spiritual satisfaction. But he was bound nevertheless, focused, with his head down, on a small fragment of the delightful Sabbath offered by our creator.

This week I got one new insight into the spiritual practice of Sabbath: it is about intimacy. Experiences of divine grace and power feel remarkably like experiences of human love and intimacy. That is why Scripture so often addresses God in metaphors of familial relationship, whether mother or father or spouse. That is why the psalmist sings, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and **all that is within me**, bless his holy name.” Jewish practice includes a Friday night ritual in which the “Sabbath Bride” is welcomed into the community. This is a joyful ceremony, ushering in a day of promise, a little slice of heaven. The spirits of the worshippers expand in response to this gift from God. Like a wedding, it symbolizes a joy in connection, a celebration of the ties that bind: the freedom to love and be loved with God’s blessing.

Intimacy implies limits. It is choosing a bond. In spiritual terms, one accepts that one will be bound; it is only a question of whether one is bound into slavery or bound into freedom. At stake is the reordering of our religious priorities.

So, now we begin to approach the “Good News” of the Gospel. Jesus is teaching at the beginning of the passage, but, as so often happens, his teaching and his actions are seamlessly connected. He gives an active demonstration of Sabbath priorities, of the sacred value of all humans, of the urgency of God’s compassion. In his speech, Jesus plays with the words “free,” “untie” and “bound.” He makes a point about treating the woman as **least** as well as an ox which is untied so that it can drink water on the Sabbath. She has been bound by her infirmity for 18 years. And not only is she a human being with worth in God’s eyes, she is a “Daughter of Abraham,” claimed in an intimate family relationship with God and all the people present. She - and her well-being - cannot be ignored.

By his actions, Jesus is teaching as well. First, he sees the woman when she enters the room. Yes, seeing someone, really seeing them, is an action. Then he calls her over, making his notice public and visible. At this point, I think there may be an unwritten action. I picture this scene with Jesus looking into the eyes of the woman he addressed, not just speaking to her from a height. That meant that **he** bent over, or perhaps got down on his knees in front of her. We see people do this when speaking to a child, or when visiting someone who cannot get up from their bed. We try to get down to their level to establish the human connection. And it is in that moment that Jesus declares her freedom. In the next moment comes the laying on of hands, another declaration of intimacy and connection: one which truly sets her free. Now she can look everyone present in the eyes...including the leader of the synagogue.

On one level, we understand the leader's chagrin. After all, she could have been healed on the next day, right? What was the big hurry, after 18 years? It seems that Jesus was in a hurry to redefine holiness, and to make the use of his time truly sacred. What better way to do that than to bend over, look a woman in the eyes, and claim her as a sister, a fellow child of Abraham, so that she could rejoice on the Sabbath day of freedom?

Now let's move forward 2000 years, to the era of mass connection and mass communication and a multitude of opportunities for spending our precious time. How would we reclaim the meaning of Sabbath in a world that has no use for this practice? I am not talking about returning to the "good old days" of Blue Laws and uni-culturalism. But can we reclaim that first century sense of difference so that we can make a difference in the world?

Jesus gives us some tools for thinking counter-culturally here. He reinterprets and remembers the law in a way to make it more meaningful, in a way to bring healing, hope, freedom, and divine intimacy through human intimacy. We keep the Sabbath holy when we praise our Creator for "crowning us with steadfast love and mercy" as the Psalmist says. We keep the Sabbath holy when we share our bread with the hungry and break yokes of oppression. We work within the realities and constraints of the modern world, but we are not bound by them. Instead we are bound in love to an endlessly merciful and compassionate God, and through God, to each other. Sabbath is our symbol of resistance to all that would enslave us, to every tyrant that demands our energy and spirit and attention.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, the brilliant Jewish theologian, said this when writing about the Sabbath: "The higher goal of spiritual living is not to amass a wealth of information, but to face sacred moments." God offers us sacred moments of delight, and worship is our communal delight in God's actions and presence, and our response in word and deed. It is our good fortune that we have the example of Jesus in front of us. He was able to live fully into the experience of Sabbath, to plumb the quiet depths within, and to turn with the eyes of God's compassion to that one person who should not wait a day longer for freedom. He was able to bend over and to rise up, celebrating her dignity, her freedom, her identity as a child of God. We may be able to do this with our cell phones or mass media, but we can never neglect the sacred gift of Christian intimacy: the eyes, the hands, the hearts that cross the divide and make us one family.

May we have the grace to be gifts to each other, this Sabbath.

Amen.