

### “The Gift of the Sabbath”

May the grace and peace of Almighty God bless you and keep you.

At 92 years old, Grace Rosicki was one the most amazing women that I had ever crossed paths with. I would often visit with her throughout the summer. As we conversed over tea and her famous egg salad sandwiches, she would tell me stories about the people and places who helped form her into the elegant and prestigious woman that she was. She always sat up straight, wearing a fashionable pink outfit, as she glimmered with flawless make up and an unwavering focus on the conversation at hand. She was smart, confident, and appeared to be a glimpse of perfection for her age. I visited with her several times before realizing that although Grace’s mind was sharp and strong, her body actually had grown frail and become weak. One day, as she got up to pour me more tea, the back that sat so straight on her sofa, suddenly became arched, and the legs that sat elegantly in one position, struggled to support her as she made her way across the parlor and into the kitchen. I felt terrible about her mobility issues and offered my assistance. Grace, of course, responded in her usual kind and gentle way by reminding me that she felt it was a wonderful privilege to serve her guest. If I had closed my eyes and simply listened, I would have had no idea that she was physically bent over and struggling across the room.

Like Grace there are many times in which people, situations, and circumstances appear perfectly polished and well kept. But, imperfections are often hidden, failures and short comings covered up, and crippling feelings of insecurity, loneliness, and fear are easily overlooked. The truth that Grace reminds me is that many times the factors that create crippling feelings of bondage or bending cannot be seen. Sometimes because they are well hidden and sometimes because disabling and unjust circumstances are treated with blind eyes and deaf ears. Many are unaware that the world’s oxygen supply is being crippled by fire that rapidly runs through the Brazilian rainforest. People and entire countries are being twisted and bent for the selfish gain of unjust politic leaders. Hearts break both publically and in silence at the sudden loss of loved ones and friends.

The disabling and crippling effects of anxiety, mental illness, and loneliness quietly sweep across the nation – often going unnoticed or undiagnosed until they manifest themselves in the form of public out lash that leaves the world crippled by anger, uncertainty and fear. There are so many circumstances, situations, and injustices that hold the potential to leave us feeling both literally and metaphorically crippled, helpless, and unable to see or stand up straight.

There are so many ways in which a person might find connection with the unnamed woman in today’s gospel according to Luke.

As was read, Luke’s narrative tells the story of a crippled lady who shows up to hear Christ speak on the Sabbath. Luke explains that for 18 years this lady had been bent over and unable to stand up straight. Her struggles were clearly physically evident, so evident that Jesus spotted her amidst the crowd and affirmed for her the gift of freedom and healing that comes from God alone. But in doing this, Christ’s actions also bring to the forefront the interpretations

and fears that are inexplicitly weighing on the heart of the leader of the synagogue who, as the story suggests, challenges Christ and his actions by reminding the crowd that healings should not take place on the Sabbath. Jesus of course responds in turn to these accusations of wrong doing. Technically, he could have noted the fact that it was God who healed the woman on the Sabbath, but rather than get caught in those semantics, he takes an alternative approach that is more evident in the original Greek than it is in English. The significance of Christ's response hinges on the double usage of the word *luó*. Now, *luó* is the very first word that I learned in Greek and it literally means to release or to set free. My Greek class was very upset that we started with what seemed to be such an insignificant word, but in the context of today's pericope, the word actually holds much significance.

Christ uses the word *luó* to draw a comparison between his actions and the actions of the leader of the synagogue. Just as Christ set the unnamed woman free from her suffering on the Sabbath, the leader of the synagogue also sets his donkey free to give it water on the Sabbath. Both Jesus and this religious leader, then, are participating in an identical type of action on the Sabbath, both are offering the gift of *luó* – both are unbinding and setting free. But Jesus doesn't finish there, he pushes the conversation slightly further by commenting with his understanding of what the Sabbath day might actually be about. He says: "ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, [also] be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 13:16). The language that Christ is using here, strongly reflects the commandment to keep the Sabbath day of rest that is outlined in Deuteronomy 5. In this version of the commandment, the Sabbath day commemorates Israel's liberation from slavery in Egypt. So, if the Sabbath law is about celebrating Israel's liberation, "observing the Sabbath day and keeping it holy" (Deut. 5:12) might be understood as a call to enact rather than inhibit liberation, freedom, or rest. It might be understood as a day to celebrate the gift of *luó*, the gift of freedom that God so willingly provides in and through Jesus Christ.

Jesus doesn't abolish Sabbath law but offers an alternative perspective on the law, a perspective that embraces the law as a good gift from God rather than a burdening demand. Yet, above and beyond this debate about scriptural interpretation, Christ is also teaching about the kingdom of God as it manifests itself within the world. Christ is revealing that the kingdom of God is about freedom and peace, not bondage or suffering. This is made even more evident in the five verses that follow today's lectionary reading, where Christ offers the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the yeast to better articulate the functionality of the kingdom of God.

Jesus is teaching about the importance of the Sabbath as it reveals that in God's Kingdom there is healing and liberation – there is freedom and rest. For in Christ the bondage of sin is broken and forgiveness is made known alongside the gift of God's perfect love. But, it is often suggested that the Church has lost sight of the significance of the Sabbath. People have chaotic work schedules and social commitments, sports are often played on Sunday morning and afternoon, and even those who have the time to attend church often hurry away or complain if the service goes longer than an hour. It is a busy world and I often wonder if the Church has become like the leader of the synagogue who embraced the Sabbath as a chore filled demand rather than a gift of God's grace?

It all comes back to the question at stake in today's text: what is the Sabbath day for? What is its purpose and functionality? I often find that much like the crippled lady in today's narrative, on the Sabbath, as we gather into worship, I am met with a sense of freedom as I am unbound by the reassurance of God's almighty love. Just as Christ approached the crippled lady,

healed her and set her free, Sabbath moments are moments in which God likewise meets God's children where they are at with the promise of freedom and hope in a Kingdom where the burdens of sorrow and pain will be no more.

The Lutheran liturgy that outlines our worship service is an excellent illustration of the untying or the setting free that is offered by the Sabbath. As Dr. Luke Bouman suggests, the service begins with Confession, where God's liberating word and freeing forgiveness meet with our weekly journey and sin. Hymns are sung collectively as a family once bound and perhaps still bound and in need of being loosed. The gospel of Christ is read and preached as a reminder of God's unfailing love and faithfulness. The Eucharist is often made available, providing a reminder of the freedom that God has already given and a foretaste of the liberation that is to come. And then, as the service concludes, a challenge is given to go in peace and to serve the Lord – a reminder that God's children have been set free and are likewise called to go forth liberating and unbinding in the name of Christ's life-giving grace.

The Sabbath is both law and gospel, it is not an unfair demand designed to hinder the human journey, but rather a wonderful opportunity to be reminded of the love and hope that is ours in Christ Jesus. It is an opportunity to find rest, a moment in which all might be reminded that no matter how tightly bound or crippling the circumstances of this life might feel, God who is rich in love and mercy offers liberating freedom with but the sound of Christ's voice or the touch of a hand.

God's love knows no bounds, it extends to the reaches of the universe, it does not discriminate or turn anyone away. It is a love that meets people where they are at and presents the hope of liberating peace both now and in the future. God's love does not take a break, it never grows weary, and it is always in full supply. Christ is the gift of compassion and forgiveness, a gift that desires justice and equality for all, a gift that calls the children of God to go and do likewise. That like with dear Grace, Disciples of Christ might learn to see beyond the initial surface, beyond faults or short comings, for the purpose of seeing one another's humanity and meeting one another's needs.

May we find continual peace and restoration in the gift of the Sabbath.

Amen.