

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

There are two sides to every story, and that includes this one. So maybe the way to preach a meaningful sermon on this week's passage might be to help us spend more time and sympathize with each of the two characters with whom Jesus interacts.

First, we have the leader of the synagogue, and that may be challenging. But let us take a sympathetic reading of this character because what he offers is a clear and compelling reading of the law. He is, in other words, right: You are not supposed to do any work on the Sabbath.

Sabbath is a day for rest and renewal. The rather negative view we take toward the various "restrictions" associated with the Sabbath would have been very foreign to the Israelites. Keep in mind that the law...including laws about the Sabbath...were given to the Israelites after their Exodus from Egypt. Egypt...where the Israelites were slaves and worked whenever their masters commanded them, likely never getting a day off. So when they receive a command to rest, to actually set aside one day of the week to rest their bodies and their livestock and retreat for a time of renewal and prayer, you can bet that they heard this only as good news.

Perhaps we would be better off taking Sabbath more seriously. We are not slaves, certainly not in the way that the Israelites were or some people still are. But plenty of our folks have to work long hours, and/or more than one job to make ends meet. Also, many more of us have a harder and harder time disconnecting from work....from emails or texts or tweets, and the endless grind of a 24/7 world that never stops. Life, for people at all levels of the economic ladder, is both hectic and demanding. Could we also benefit from a proscribed time of rest?

Which is what the leader of the synagogue is worried about. Once you start making exceptions for this reason or that, pretty soon no one is really keeping the Sabbath and it has lost its point altogether. And, of course, it is not just the Sabbath. The whole law is like that. You keep making exceptions and it is not really a law anymore. It is more like a suggestion, with little or no power to protect and preserve us.

Truth be told, we regularly agree with this leader. Perhaps not about the Sabbath, but most of us have laws that we think are particularly important and we get nervous if we see people not respecting them. Little things like eating only organic foods, our children's bedtimes, refusing to take any calls on our day off. Or maybe it is a much larger issue, like traditional gender roles or human sexuality. Whatever it is, there are some laws we feel you should just keep. Period. And if not, who knows what will unravel next? That is what this well-intentioned, law-abiding leader of the synagogue believes.

So now, let us turn to the woman, she who has viewed the world from waist level for years. She has not been able to look anyone in the eye for as long as she can remember. She is, I imagine, also a faithful, law-abiding member of this very synagogue. After all, she is right there that Saturday, in spite of her condition, worshiping with her community.

And who knows, perhaps she also had concerns about keeping the Sabbath. Maybe she was downright conservative in her approach to the law generally. Yet whatever principles or resolutions she may have entered with, it seems that they all took a back seat to a sense of overwhelming relief and gratitude when Jesus approached and healed her. When he called her a daughter of Abraham and restored her to full health, what were those first breaths of air like, taken in by lungs no longer cramped from stooping over? And whose eyes did she first meet, as she stood up straight for the first time in anyone's memory? Or maybe, more importantly, what happened to all those laws and rules and concerns and regulations? Did they fall away, as if they were of no importance?

No. They were just suspended, perhaps temporarily forgotten, in those first few moments of sheer grace and gratitude. The law matters because it helps us order our lives and keep the peace. The law matters because it sets needed boundaries that create room in which we can flourish. The law matters because it encourages us...sometimes even pushes us...to look beyond ourselves so that we might love and care for our neighbor.

But as important as law is...and notice that Jesus does not set aside the law but rather offers a different interpretation of it...it must always bow to mercy, to life, to freedom. Law helps us live our lives better, but grace creates life itself. Law helps order our world, but grace is what holds the world together. Law pushes us to care for each other, but grace restores us to each other when we have failed in the law.

Clergy are always challenged to find the application of biblical texts with modern life, in part to help others find the living God around and among them. So, hear this example from my experience.

Article 10 of the Family Court Act is the New York civil law handling child abuse or neglect, covering a broad range of allegations from the most horrible things you can imagine, down to dirty homes, insufficient plumbing, lack of basic medical care, or parental drug abuse. The procedure of the law is straight forward. The Department of Social Services, or DSS, files a petition in Family Court against the respondents, listing the allegations in detail. Folks come into court, with right to counsel.

If a denial is entered, the journey begins toward a trial on the facts, or a fact-finding hearing. If that trial occurs, the judge writes a decision finding whether or not the child or children are neglected or abused as a matter of fact...did the DSS prove its case, or not? If the judge finds in favor of the DSS, then a whole second journey begins, called disposition, and folks have a right to a second trial, one which the court will have to decide: "OK, the court has found abuse or neglect, so now what are we going to do about it?" In other words, what services will be directed? Will the child or children remain in foster care? What will be the plan, if any, to reunite the family?

Over thirty years ago when I started, this process was very formal, and often took a year or more. And, in the meantime, the kids were separated and put in foster care while the parents and DSS took adversarial positions and fought it out. Imagine your kids yanked out of your home for a year before anybody got around to working on what to do to make things right, or at least better, or safer? That was the administrative and legal interpretation of that law then.

Now, it is much, much different, even though the law has not fundamentally changed, and I give complete credit to the courts and DSS for a paradigm shift....because, in a direct but secular way, grace has become the lens for the law's application. Now, DSS files petitions as a last resort, preferring to work with families out of court. If court is necessary, at the first appearance, most cases have an agreed temporary "safety plan"...kids placed with suitable relatives instead of stranger, third party foster homes, if removal is needed. And, at the first, family needs are identified and services offered...all for the purpose of the prime goal of the entire system: strengthening families to either keep them safely intact, or to successfully reunify them as soon as possible...and not start a year down the road.

I have been blessed to have worked, and to have seen and shared this transformation with clients and persons in need...so it is easier for me to observe, in an exclusively governmental and secular world, the practical coming of the kingdom of God. While the law helps us make sense of and get more out of life in the kingdom of the world, it must always bend to the grace that constitutes the abundant life Jesus proclaims. For above and beyond all the laws ever received or conceived, the absolute law is love: love God and love your neighbor. Or, perhaps, love God by loving your neighbor.

So, of course, Jesus heals on the Sabbath. And of course, she gives thanks right away. And of course, the crowd rejoices. Which is what always happens when grace invites us simultaneously to value the law and at times suspend it out of mercy, compassion, and love.

So, in closing, we are invited to live within, and see around us, the good news that

1. God gave law out of love to grant us freedom from the tyranny of all manner of slavery whether external or self-imposed;
2. God forgives us when we fail in the law and invites us to try again; and
3. Finally, God insists that the law does not and will not have the last word, for there will always be times when law must bend to compassion and love, all in the name of our loving God, as the Father, and as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit.

Amen.