

You Are Set Free
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Based on Luke 13:10-17
Rev. Craig M Sturm Trinity Lutheran Church, Sherman

Now that the beginning of the school year is upon us, many school districts are updating their discipline manuals. Many districts have adopted what is known as a “zero tolerance” policy. Zero tolerance means that a school will automatically and severely punish students who disobey certain rules, usually pertaining to weapons or drugs. When it comes to zero tolerance, there is no such thing as extenuating circumstances or legitimate explanations.

A zero tolerance policy is what the leader of the synagogue was advocating in the gospel today. The leader was responsible for keeping the Sabbath day activities on the straight and narrow. God declared that the Sabbath would be a day of rest and worship. No “work” on the Sabbath meant exactly that – no work! It all goes back to the creation story where God rested on the seventh day.

Unfortunately, no work on the Sabbath had turned into nothing more than trying to avoid every rabbinically-vetoed activity! As you can imagine, the people had come to see the Sabbath as one great big “thou shall not!”

Instead of the Sabbath being a celebration of the divine presence, instead of it being a joy-filled opportunity of faith and fellowship, Temple time had become a time to do nothing lest we offend Almighty God.

They had lost sight of what the Sabbath day was all about. Jesus must have sensed this as he taught in the Temple that day. Jesus wasn’t concerned about “keeping” the Sabbath, as if to keep it neatly tucked away so that you don’t break it. Jesus desired to incarnate the Sabbath – to make the presence of God real for those who had gathered. To be in the presence of God is life-changing. It blesses us. It offers us a kind of peace and hope like none other. Jesus wanted his followers to look forward to the Sabbath gathering because of the blessings that it brought into their lives.

To teach them the true meaning of Sabbath, Jesus decides to do something spectacular. He picks out a woman in the congregation who had been crippled for 18 years. The damage in her back was so far advanced that she could no longer stand up straight. In today’s world, we would probably call it an extreme case of osteoporosis.

Jesus looks at her, sees the pain and despair in her eyes, and has pity on her. He lays his hands on her and says, “Woman, you are set free from your sickness.” Instantly she is healed and is able to stand up straight once again. The first thing out of her mouth was words of praise, glorifying God for his healing power and mercy.

Her life had been resurrected! That which was filled with decay and pain was now filled with new life. I picture her shouting out the same words spoken by Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Free at last, free at last! Thank God Almighty, I’m free at last!”

Not everyone was as thrilled about this event as she was. The Temple leader was quick to cast judgment on Jesus for healing the woman on the Sabbath. Healing, after all, was considered work, which was forbidden by God on the Sabbath. Jesus challenged the leader’s logic by reminding him that even on the Sabbath he unties his animal and leads it out to get a drink. Sure, it is consider an act of work, but it is done out of compassion for the animal. So, Jesus says, isn’t it only right that I have compassion on this woman, unbind her and set her free?

Yes, rules are necessary. But we must be careful, Jesus argues, not to let our rules rule us. “The Sabbath was created for humans; humans weren’t created for the Sabbath.” Jesus also reminds us that God never takes a day off of finding a way to make his presence and power known. The glory and mercy of God are always anticipating opportunities to make themselves known. God’s presence doesn’t remove itself from people every seventh day. In fact, God established the Sabbath day to give believers an opportunity to have a personal encounter with God in everyday life.

When we gather on Sundays, we don’t just declare that God is enthroned way up in the heavens somewhere. Rather, when we gather, we celebrate the fact that God has come near to us in the person of Jesus Christ. Through Word and Sacrament, we experience Christ’s true presence among us – God with us, here in this place. And if God is with us, powerful, life-changing things are bound to happen.

By choosing to heal the disabled woman on the Sabbath, Jesus chooses to restore the true meaning of the Sabbath – being at peace in the presence of God. By healing the woman’s pain and suffering, she could simply “be” in the presence of God and be blessed by his glory and love.

This healing, then, wasn’t just something extra that happened on the Sabbath. The healing of the woman, Jesus argued, instituted the Sabbath celebration. It became the moment where Almighty God and the people of God had a one-on-one encounter. The kingdom of God came near.

“If only,” we might say to ourselves. If only we could have such awesome experiences during *our* Sabbath celebrations. Maybe, just maybe, such powerful healing moments occur so regularly that we take them for granted. If we are honest with ourselves, we, just like the crippled woman, come before God all bound up. So many things can put us in a bind – a bad habit, a self-defeating attitude, feeling overwhelmed, a broken relationship with a family member or friend, the desire to fix all of the problems in the world by next Tuesday.

God created the Sabbath so that we can bring all of that stuff and lay it at the feet of Jesus and allow him to take those burdens away from us. The Sabbath day breaks the cycle of our everyday lives that tends to wear us down. As we gather in this holy place and listen to Jesus teach, we soon sense that Jesus is unbinding us from everything that hinders us from being at peace with God and our neighbor.

We should have the expectation that the time we spend with God on the Sabbath day will be life-changing. We should expect nothing less than what the woman received in the gospel today. "You are set free!" Jesus says to us.

If we believe that Jesus has truly risen from the dead and, through the Holy Spirit, is with us here today, then we must also trust that Christ still has the power to set us free from anything that binds us. In fact, each of us in this room has already experienced this kind of powerful healing. In our liturgy, as we bring our confession to God, we often say, "We are in bondage to sin – in bondage to sin – and cannot free ourselves. Have mercy on us!"

And how does Jesus respond? "I declare to you – at this moment, on this Sabbath day – the entire forgiveness of all your sins." "You are set free;" Jesus says to us, "free from all your guilt, shame, and regrets." When we hear Jesus speak those words to us, we actually feel ourselves standing taller than we did before. We experience healing.

Or during the Sharing of the Peace you extend the sign of peace to someone with whom you have had a disagreement. And in that moment of reconciliation, you hear Jesus words, "You are set free; free to see others as your brother and sister in Christ; free to focus not on your differences, but on that which you have in common."

Time and time again, just like the woman in the gospel today, we are set free on the Sabbath day. And we are given many opportunities to sing God's praise for the healing we have experienced.

We are set free from sin, set free from always having to get it right and have all the right answers. We are set free from worrying about what tomorrow will bring. For Christ has died on the cross setting us free from sin and death. God will still be in charge no matter what tomorrow brings. Christ has promised to be with us always, so we never have to face anything alone.

Believe the words Christ speaks to you this day: You are set free!

Through the proclamation of the forgiveness of sin, or perhaps through the bread and wine of communion, feel Christ place his healing hands upon you. Feel Christ offer you the gift of healing, the gift of freedom, the gift of peace. Feel yourself being able to stand up straight and tall once again, no longer burdened by the chains of sin, doubt, and despair.

“You are set free!” Christ says.

Thanks be to God! Amen.