

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor Bill White

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The Sermon Text — Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, 'Woman, you are set free from your ailment.' When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.' But the Lord answered him and said, 'You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?' When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

SERMON

Years ago I was leading a Bible Study group at church on a Sunday night. The topic was forgiveness. Part way through the discussion a man who had only been worshiping at the church for three or four weeks, a man I barely knew, said he had a question. "How often," he said, "do you have to ask for forgiveness in order to receive it?" I was about to answer when it struck me that there was more to this question than what appeared.

"Do you have a specific issue in mind?" I asked.

"As a matter of fact, I do," he said. "A bit over a year ago I fell in love with a woman at work whose name is Kathy. After seeing her secretly for a couple of months I decided to leave my wife and move in with her. I knew it was wrong to leave my wife so I immediately began to ask God for forgiveness. A month ago I moved from Iowa to this city, and Kathy moved with me. I continue to ask God to forgive me, as does Kathy, who left her family too, but we don't feel forgiven."

I interrupted. "Too? You not only left your wife, but your family?"

"Yes, I sorta left my children. I have three children. When I was in Iowa I saw them two to three times a week. If my wife is willing to let the children move to Michigan then I'll be with my children again."

The Bible Study group of about 20 people was unusually quiet and all looked toward me as if to say, "This one is yours." I too was unusually quiet as I sorted things out. "You have no intention of moving back with your wife and your children, is that correct?" I asked.

"Correct. Since I'm not planning on moving back I'd like forgiveness once and for all."

"You want to be forgiven even though you plan to continue to live in a relationship that you believe to be wrong?"

"Correct. I've confessed that it is wrong, and now I want forgiveness for it."

"Usually when we ask for forgiveness we at the same time decide to stop doing what we are confessing to be wrong. It would be like asking to be forgiven for stealing prior to committing a robbery. Normally we don't confess our sin, ask for forgiveness in order to continue to do what we think and know to be wrong. Forgiveness requires something on our part."

The man said, "It sounds like you are saying forgiveness is conditional. I've always heard it was unconditional. It sounds like you are saying forgiveness isn't free."

"It is free," I said, "but it isn't cheap. By your own words you are doing something wrong. You want God to forgive you for doing something wrong, but you plan to continue to do that wrong thing." Eventually other people joined in the conversation, which lasted the entire time we were together. As we left the church and headed to the parking lot Dan, a guy on my softball team who came to the study only after a lot of urging on my part fell into stride with me and said, "And I thought Bible study was going to be boring. If you can guarantee this kind of excitement I think we will fill this place next week." It was a night of surprises.

Every now and then when you gather to talk with God and about God something breaks loose. You are surprised. Another time a man interrupted a study I was leading by saying, "I'm addicted to smoking pot and it is ruining my life. Can I talk about it in this group?" That too was a remarkable evening. That too was a big surprise.

Something like that happened one Sabbath when Jesus was teaching in a small church, a synagogue. As Jesus was talking a woman with scoliosis, or some disease that caused her to be bent over, walked in the room. Later it was discovered that she had been crippled for eighteen years. We aren't told what Jesus was teaching, but he spotted the woman and said to her, "You are set free from your ailment." He put his hands on her and she straightened up like a young sapling, and immediately began to praise God. In a flash eighteen years of confinement, eighteen years of looking at the ground, eighteen years of not being able to look up and look out, vanished. No wonder she began to praise God. What a surprise to everyone there, including the man in charge of the synagogue.

We don't know much about this man except he was a respected person in the community; he was the leader of the synagogue, the president of the church council. He was a man who others trusted, and he was a defender of the faith. We are told that he "kept on telling the people," that what they saw violated Jewish law. He might have said something like this, "I'm sorry to remind you of this, but we have rules against this. We are for healing, but not on the Sabbath. The Sabbath was intended for rest. The Sabbath was intended to connect us to God. Once you start eating away on it you never can tell what will happen. Today you heal someone, but tomorrow people will argue that we also have to open the drug store so that people can buy medicine, and then the people who work at the drug store will have to leave their homes. They won't be able to have their Sabbath rest. Next people will say that they need to buy groceries on the Sabbath because good food is necessary and more people will have to work in order that the grocery store can be open, and more people will fail to have their Sabbath rest.

"Next, they will hold civic events which will need police and those who provide public service to supervise, and they will be unable to be with their families on the Sabbath. Soon department stores will be open on the Sabbath and people will think nothing of shopping on this holy day. Violating the Sabbath is a slippery slope. Today you heal, tomorrow you will have runs for the cure, marathons, and tournaments for children who play hockey, baseball, soccer and all kinds of sports, all good things, but worship and rest will disappear. Healing is the first domino to fall; soon they all fall down. There is no reason that this healing cannot take place later today, after all the Sabbath ends at sundown, or we can come back tomorrow, after all the woman has suffered for 18 years, what will another 24 hours mean? The Sabbath was created for God, and once you tear a piece of it away, it is gone."

Does this make some sense? Do you see what has happened to Sabbath observance? For many families Sunday is just as busy as every other day of the week. Over and over again I'm told by people, "We travel every weekend in the summer. That is why we aren't in church. Last Sunday we had just under 900. A normal Sunday in October is 1300. There is a lot going on Sundays.

If the head of the synagogue made such a speech I think Jesus would have bought a part of it, but he never believed that any law trumped human need. Jesus did not believe that any religious observance was more important than human life. He pointed out that if your Holstein got sick on the Sabbath you would call the vet. There is no reason to wait a day to get healthy for an animal or a person. In fact, Jesus felt so strong about this that he called the man a hypocrite. He said that the man said one thing and did another. He didn't practice what he preached. Jesus was saying that the church of his day was a negative institution. Many people think it still is.

In a book called, "Blue Like Jazz," Donald Miller tells what a group of Christians did on the campus of Reed College in the state of Oregon. Reed evidently is a very liberal college and Christians are in a very small minority.

There was a festival planned and this small group of believers decided to have a confessional booth, though it was to be a confessional booth with a huge difference. Instead of asking non-believers to confess their sins they decided that the Christians would confess to whoever would stop to listen. Donald and his friends knew that Christians had the reputation for being against things, so they were going to turn the tables.

The first guy stopped by and thought that they were asking him to confess. When it finally sunk in that the Christians were going to confess he asked, "What do you want to confess?"

The answer was, "Everything." Donald confessed that the Crusades were wrong and that Christians were guilty of segregation. He said that though Jesus said to feed the poor and to heal the sick he had never done much about that. Though Jesus said to love those who persecute us he tended to lash out.

Other members of the Christian group also confessed. It went like that for a couple of hours. The people who heard confessions often said, "Hey man, I forgive you." A number of students decided that if this was what Christians did they wanted to study the Bible. That fall instead of one Bible study group there were four different groups on the campus of Reed College.

I think it is fair to say that we believers often have expectations of other people that we don't meet ourselves. We judge others more harshly than we judge ourselves. And we are better known for what we oppose than what we are for. We are for peace and justice, but we appear to be more interested in order and revenge. We are opposed to divorce, but in the past we seemed to be opposed to people who were divorced. What we ignore and what others don't know is that we start most worship services by confessing that we have messed up things this past week. We have sinned against God by what we have done and what we have left undone.

And we have ignored the Sabbath which was given to us as a gift for our healing, and our wholeness. It was meant for rest, and for our time with God, both which will be beneficial to us. Observing the Sabbath is not so much about what we don't do, as what we do. The goal is to have a special day, a day of rest, a day when we aren't frantic, a day when we have time to worship, and time to do good things for others. To let this happen perhaps we will decide to eliminate things that make us busy, or we will decide that we can do these things some other time, things like shopping. Perhaps we cut back on travel and activities that exhaust us and find time to do quiet things together.

But most of all...Sunday is a day to pray, and love. It is a day to do good and healthy things for ourselves and for others. It is a day of healing for the body, soul and mind. That is the way Jesus used it, and the entire crowd got it. We are told that when they witnessed everything, "They rejoiced at all the wonderful things he was doing." That would be a great response from people today, wouldn't it?

Amen. © 2010