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Working on Sundays

Text: St. Luke 13:10-17

Melodrama is a form of entertainment in which the characters that are good, are really, really good, and the characters that are bad are really, really bad. There are no gray areas in melodrama, and there is no deep thinking required to figure out the characters, either. In fact, just to guarantee that there is no confusion in anybody's mind about who is good and who is bad the characters are given names such as Snidely Whiplash and Dudley Dought. At one point, melodrama was a form of entertainment played out on the stage and the audience was expected to boo when the villain came on, and to cheer when the hero came on. It is not played out on the stage so much anymore, but it does still appear in cartoons – and in politics and on Glenn Beck's show. This seems appropriate since cartoon characters are not really three dimensional anyhow. Real people are a little more complex than melodrama makes them out to be.

Because real people are more complex, in others sorts of drama, the dramas of real life, the relation of good and evil is less clear cut. However, in those dramas when a person is really good, or when we really hate somebody, we tend to flatten out all the characters and to make real life into a melodrama. We identify with the good and we tend to make the other side really evil, and without any sort of point worth listening to. That is too bad, because even when the one side *is* really good, in life's real dramas the other side may still have a point worth listening to. Indeed, unless you do listen to it, you probably won't get the real and full point of the good character.

I bring all this up because it may help us better understand Jesus' confrontation with the

Pharisees in today's Gospel lesson. It is so easy to see the goodness of Jesus' compassion when on the Sabbath he heals a woman who had been crippled for eighteen years. And the Pharisees look really bad because they seem to oppose Jesus' compassion and are narrow legalists. They look really bad because they resist him and want the rule above all even though they, too, seem to see his goodness. For even they seem to agree, begrudgingly, with his argument that if they would give water to a donkey on the Sabbath, then, why shouldn't this woman be given what she needs? This is indicated when the text says that they were put to shame. Clearly their consciences were pricked. If they were utterly obtuse they wouldn't feel this way. But, shamed or not, legalists or not, that doesn't mean that they don't have a point. Indeed, I want to suggest, unless one does see something of their point, one doesn't get all of Jesus' point, either. This is not melodrama, as both sides are serious about what is going on.

So what is the Pharisees' point? It is one about the holiness of the Sabbath, and that one is not to take the Sabbath lightly. That is an important point, and one that we in contemporary America have a hard time appreciating because we do take it so lightly. While there is no day quite like Sunday – it has a feel unlike any other day – Sunday is hardly a holy day anymore or even a day of rest. Certain blue laws still exist – in New Jersey, one cannot sell cars, for example, on Sunday or sell spirits in DC; still, profane and secular commerce slows only slightly on the Sabbath. Sunday is often just a day set aside for special kinds of commerce, say, the kind that is professional sports. Sunday church services are also now competing with junior football and soccer leagues, and in the case of some families, “Meet the Press.” So there is little religious to the Sabbath anymore. But it hasn't just been secularized; it is no longer even a day of rest of any kind for many people. Many of the rich keep working away at home to stay ahead of everybody else, and the poor often have to work on Sundays just to stay not too far behind

everybody else. So rich or poor, in this case there is no time that we aren't thinking about money. Thus, the Pharisees do have a point, and it is one that if we took it seriously would surely make us better off than we are. We might learn to relax, we might have Sunday dinner together again, we might learn that we have to pay people fairly so that they don't have to work on Sundays. And, if we took it at its proper religious depth, we might also relax enough to let God dwell in our lives, and become the godlike people we were meant to be. That is where the Pharisees may even have a point when they suggest that this healing since it had waited eighteen years could wait another day. Even we when we are being fair really do not expect doctors to be open on Sundays to cure our long term ailments. How much more ought that to be the case on a day when both patient and physician should be attending to their spiritual health?

That is the Pharisees' point, and it is actually a good one. We need to take it far more seriously than we currently do. But it is also one that we need to take to heart when considering what Jesus does, for Jesus himself takes it to heart. For in healing the woman Jesus is *not* so much disagreeing with the Pharisees' point as he is criticizing them for failing to see what he is doing and failing to see where their point applies. Jesus is *not*, for example, contradicting the Pharisees and saying that there is something more important than the Sabbath, and that he, or the crippled woman, are a special case, that they have an exemption from the rules. After all, *everybody* assumes as much. No, Jesus is actually agreeing with them on the importance of the Sabbath, and that is precisely *why* he does heal the woman on it. How so? Well, he is not healing her as an exception to the Sabbath rule, he is not overruling the importance of the Sabbath with something more important which we think we can do at will. He is healing her because the Sabbath is so important and because he wants her to be part of it. He is healing her so she can go into the Temple and be part of the Sabbath.

Consider here simply what he says to the Pharisees when they complain that there are six other days on which she could be healed. He says, “Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or donkey from the manger and lead it away to give it water?” On the face of it, watering donkeys is not exactly a clear analogy to healing somebody. But as ancient commentators on this passage understood, there may be more similarity between the two cases than first appears. The reason that the work of untying a donkey and leading him to water is allowed is so that the donkey may live; to leave him without water would be cruel, and perhaps threatens his life. So, the ancients reasoned, it was something similar that Jesus thought that he was doing. For, they claimed, the healing that took place wasn’t just compassion for her physical suffering; it was what let the woman participate in the Sabbath where there is life. In this sense, not to heal her would be not to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. The Sabbath was meant to give life; thus to heal her was not to give an alternative to the Sabbath but, like giving a donkey a drink, it was to give her what she needed so that she could find life and rest on the Sabbath. Being in agony for all these years she certainly had neither on the Sabbath. Now, in part the ancient interpreters thought this way because they saw the fact of her being bent over and bowed down as a symbol of sin, and of evil and anxieties weighing heavy on the human soul. Thus Jesus was not only healing her body, but her soul and in that sense was truly opening the spiritual meaning of Sabbath to her, and thus was not defying its holiness but making it more accessible.

Think what you will about the fancifulness of ancient interpretation, but, fanciful or not, it cuts to the important issue. Jesus’ compassion in healing the woman was not meant as an alternative to the Sabbath. He gives no reason to weigh things we would rather do on Sundays against the duty to be in church. Rather what he does is to let us see the deepest importance of the Sabbath, and to see what we ought to be doing. How?

Above all, this act of compassion lets us see what the Sabbath is really meant to be. It is, of course, the day when God's people, in remembrance of God having created in six days and having rested on the seventh, themselves rest and refresh themselves body and spirit. More importantly, they do this by giving thanks to God for what he has created -- and reminding themselves that they were not the creators. So it is a day when they are simply to look around them and enjoy the creation, and in enjoying it give full and explicit thanks to God for it in their worship. But if this is the Sabbath we know, both Christian and Jewish traditions also talk about another Sabbath – an eighth day, a day of perpetual rest and of unshakeable knowledge of God. It is the day in which the chief end of humanity is achieved. This is the day in which we are healed, fulfilled, and live in joy. This day is not a religious obligation or duty; this day is what we were made for. As St. Augustine famously wrote, “ you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they find rest in you.” This is the day we rest and delight in God.

But this act of compassion also lets us see even more clearly what Jesus was doing, and continues to do, when he healed the woman. He is signaling that this perpetual Sabbath has, in him, arrived and that all people are to keep it. One might well keep in mind that in the old law deformity and illness made one impure and kept one out of the temple. By healing on the Sabbath Jesus shows that everyone, no matter how deformed in body or in soul they may have been before, may be part of God's kingdom. But Jesus, I think, also goes even farther than that and shows that the new Sabbath is itself healing. To participate in it, to believe in Christ as the one whom God sent in the fullness of time, *is* to become whole, and it is to find God's kingdom.

To understand that finally it lets us see something of what we ought to be doing in keeping the Sabbath holy, and it does *not* boil down to the choice between a rule or compassion. Too often, we set obligations and order *against* love and think that holiness is entirely in the one,

missing the other. For example, I have heard stories of what Sundays often were like from friends whose families kept the Sabbath strictly. There was, of course, church, not once but twice, at least, on Sundays. Other than that one really didn't do much of anything, although reading, but strictly of a pious nature, was allowed. Now, there is a point to keeping the Sabbath that strictly, and part of it surely is that if you give an inch they'll take a mile, as seems to have been the case with most people these days. If there is this point, however, it is hard to imagine that such Sabbath keeping can be anything but dull and legalistic rule keeping which has the tendency, as it did with the Pharisees, to degenerate into piety for piety's sake, and not for God's or humanity's. On the other hand, those who stress love alone and who think that keeping the Sabbath is optional as long as they are good people also miss what keeping the Sabbath is about. The average attendance of most Presbyterian churches on any given Sunday is usually a third or less of the actual active membership, which means that two thirds on any given Sunday are missing out on where life is to be found. But love and joy and order are not incompatible. Love frees us for good order, and good order open itself to love.

Thus we need to recognize that we do need to keep the Sabbath and come here. There is healing here and we need to grasp it. Jesus healed the woman on the Sabbath; he wants to do the same for us. That is why he says, as we recite at the invitation to communion, "Come to me all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest for your souls." How are we healed? It is by confessing our sins, of course, but we are also healed by lifting up our souls and training our eyes on what is alone good. We are healed, in short, by rejoicing. We are healed by partaking of what God has to offer us here. In staying away, we refuse our own healing. Thus the Sabbath is not an option; it is God's own instrument.

We also need to recognize that it is also our duty to come here to help heal others. We are

expected to heal on the Sabbath, too, for inasmuch as we belong to Christ, his work is ours, too. This healing is something that is done in our prayers for others, and in our fellowship with them. On Sundays whenever it is difficult to find the energy to come here, it may be helpful to remind oneself that other people need you for their healing.

Finally, we should know, too, that the Sabbath can give us meaning for all our work throughout the week. The Sabbath as Christ shows is not just rest from work, it can be its own kind of joyful work. To learn that on this one day of the week is then to change how all the rest of the week will go, for suddenly for those who have been healed and who have rejoiced on this day what is important and what is not comes into a new light. For those people, work itself is no longer simply for us, but a means by which we can give something to the whole world.

Let us therefore keep the Sabbath as it was meant to be kept – as a day of joy and a day where compassion reigns, and that gives meaning to all else we do.