

Proper 16 (C)

Lk 13.10-17

I'm going to start off by talking a little bit about how *not* to read this morning's gospel. There's a common mistake people often make when it comes to this story and other stories like it, so in order for us to recognize what this story really has to say to us we have to get past our tendency to misread it.

The mistake we often make when it comes to stories like this one has to do with what we think Jesus is saying about the observance of the law. In our gospel lesson, Jesus ends up arguing with the leader of the synagogue over the question of sabbath observance: is it permissible to do the work of healing on the sabbath or not? The leader of the synagogue objects to the work Jesus is doing, but Jesus counters with an argument that seems to suggest works of healing actually take precedence over the observance of the Sabbath.

And there's our mistake: we think that what Jesus is doing is pitting one part of the covenant over and against another part. Over here we have the demands of sabbath observance, and over there we have the importance of works of mercy. We might even boil this down in terms of the two great commandments: love of God over here, and love of neighbor over there. Sabbath observance as love of God, acts of mercy as love of neighbor.

Well, clearly, it's mercy over sabbath, right? If we adopt this strategy for hearing this story, then we're likely to conclude that Jesus is saying that at least in some instances it's okay to fudge a bit in our observance of one part of the law if doing so allows us to fulfill another part of the law.

I think this is a mistake; I think Jesus is doing something else entirely in this story. He's not showing us how to cut corners; rather, he's showing us what the fulfillment of the law really looks like.

Let's go back for just a moment to the book of Genesis, because there's something there that will help us better understand what Jesus is doing. If we go back all the way to the very beginning of Genesis, we find that sabbath observance is hard-wired into the structure of creation itself. Remember what Genesis has to say about the first sabbath? "On the seventh day God finished the work he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation" (Gen 2.2-3).

We see here that sabbath observance is about two things: it's about rest, but it's also about fulfillment or completion. God rests on the seventh day, but that's not all he does: he *finishes* the work he had done, and he *blesses* this work of fulfillment. Rest and work are not *opposed* to one another: they complement one another. The rest God enjoys on the sabbath is not an abandonment of work; it's the consummation of his work, the reason he was doing the work in the first place, so that he might enjoy the fullness of his creation.

Now, how does this inform our reading of this morning's gospel? Jesus demonstrates that the

work of healing is not opposed to the observance of the sabbath: rather, these two things complement one another. The whole point of the sabbath is to bring things to their perfection, to fulfill their nature and their purpose and to enjoy the communion that's possible only when that work is done.

Standing there in that synagogue, Jesus looks around and not only sees someone in need, he sees part of God's good creation waiting to be brought to completion. So he sets about finishing that work, and it's worth noting that the work he does has both a physical and a spiritual dimension: not only does he heal the woman's body, he delivers her of the spirit that had oppressed her for so many years. And he does this, not by setting aside the demands of sabbath observance, but by reminding those present what the observance of the sabbath is really about.

There's a connection between our gospel lesson and the reading we heard from Isaiah, but in order to recognize this connection we have to account for a little more of what Isaiah has to say than our lectionary gives us. If we back up just a few verses from the beginning of our first lesson we find something rather interesting: God speaks to his people through the prophet specifically about their observance of the sabbath.

God says, "You complain to me about how I never seem to notice all the hard work you're doing: you pray, and you fast, and you observe the sabbath, and you say, 'Lord, why won't you show us your favor? Look at all the hard work we're doing.' But let's take a look at all this hard work you're doing: are you really working for my sake, or are you working for your own? You put on quite a show with all that hard work, but is that really what you think I want you to do?"

"Is not this the work that I would rather have you do: to loose the bonds, to undo the yoke, to set free, to share your bread and bring the homeless into your house, to cloth the naked, to allow no part of my good creation to remain incomplete or unfulfilled? Do *that*," says the Lord, "and then your light shall rise and you will walk at liberty, then you will be called the repairer of the breach, and then you will raise up the foundations for generations to come."

In today's gospel, Jesus fulfills the vision of the sabbath given to God's people through Isaiah: he sets free the oppressed, he undoes the yoke, he offers help to those in need, and in all this he does what God himself does. He finishes the work of creation and in so doing blesses the day on which he does it. This is what faithful sabbath observance looks like.

Now, what does all of this have to do with us? Perhaps the first thing it has to do with us bears on how we think about the relationship between law and grace. Many Western Christians tend to think of these things as being opposed to one another: we've got the Old Testament God of law and judgment over here, and the New Testament God of grace and mercy over here.

But Jesus shows us law and grace are not opposed to one another; rather, they *complement* one another. Remember what our Lord had to say about this: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." There it is again: fulfillment, completion, perfection. Jesus consummates God's creative action just as he consummates God's redemptive action, and he does both by weaving them together. Law is perfected through grace, and grace finds its fulfillment in perfect observance of the law.

That brings us to a second way this story speaks to us today: it breaks down some of the assumptions we may have about the relationship between what we consider sacred and what we consider secular. In today's gospel lesson, the leader of the synagogue tried rather hard to keep these things apart: there's God and the sabbath over here, and there's the rest of life over there.

But Jesus shows us another way: he shows us that the perfection of each is to be found in the other. Every dimension of secular life remains hollow and meaningless until it finds its fulfillment in the sacred. Similarly, our commitment to the sacred will be empty and pointless if we don't allow what we learn here to make a difference in our lives out there.

What this means is that the church is to be a place where people come not only to practice their spirituality, but to learn how to bring every dimension of their lives into alignment with the gospel of Christ. Part of our calling as the people of God is to help those in the world recognize how to reach the goals towards which they strive so very hard but never seem to manage to achieve; working for freedom and truth and goodness and justice and beauty and community and prosperity is all well and good, but the bottom line is that all of those things ultimately depend on God, and it's our job to help the world recognize that.

There are two parts in our liturgy that are especially helpful as examples of how to understand the relationship between work and sabbath, between law and grace, between the secular and the sacred. One of those parts is the offertory. When we present our offerings to God, we're not just putting money in the plate so the church can pay the bills. Our offerings are concrete, visible signs of our whole lives; they represent the fruit of our labor. They're a measure of our desire to surrender ourselves to God so that his grace may be manifest in every dimension of our lives.

The other part of our liturgy that is especially helpful for thinking about the relationship between work and sabbath is the Eucharist. In some parishes, you'll hear the priest offer a prayer at the very beginning of the Eucharistic prayer. The prayer goes like this: "Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this bread to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made; it will become for us the bread of life. Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this wine to offer, the fruit of the vine and the work of human hands; it will become for us the cup of salvation."

That which earth has given and human hands have made, become for us the bread of life: that's a wonderful way of describing the relationship between sabbath and work, between the sacred and the secular. The elements of the Eucharist symbolize the whole of the creative process, from the natural growth of the grain to the human ingenuity and effort necessary to turn that grain into bread. And when we offer those things to God, he does something extraordinary with them: he gives them back to us as vehicles of grace. This is what God has in mind for every aspect of our lives; learning how to manifest that exchange is what it means to be a living sacrifice.

In today's gospel, our Lord shows us what faithful sabbath observance looks like, and in so doing enables us listen with attentive ears to the words of the prophet Isaiah: "If you take delight in the LORD's day and honor the sabbath of your God, not going your own ways or serving your own interests, then your light shall rise in the darkness and the LORD will make you ride upon the heights of the earth and will feed you with the heritage of his people, for the mouth of the LORD

has spoken.”

21 August 2019
Trinity Episcopal Cathedral
Columbia, SC