

Daughters and Sons

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 13:10-17



Eighteen years. That's a long time to see mostly the ground beneath you. That's the length of time from birth to freshman year of college to get acquainted with the distinctive view of your feet shuffling awkwardly, uncertainly, through the world. Perhaps if she turns her head for a moment she can catch a quick glimpse of blue sky in her peripheral vision, a blur of the face of a loved one as he speaks, a child playing, the water lapping on the shore. But these were always brief moments, and even then, the perspective was skewed, sideways, never really complete. For eighteen years her vision was narrowed, her movements constricted. The only grace was that she didn't have to see the sidelong glances, the looks of revulsion; or worse, pity.

How many trips on the Sabbath has she made to the synagogue to worship? She could hear the speakers, but rarely see them. She could imagine the colors of the worship space, but rarely take them in fully. She could listen to the reading from the scroll of the Torah, the Law, but rarely behold the scroll itself, with its silver crown and breastplate, distinctive parchment like the ripples on a lake, with the sacred words in black Hebrew lettering, words of life. Always, her view was partial, incomplete. Eighteen years. A long time.

Joe Baskette was an elder in the little church I served while I was a college student. The church building was constructed in 1880, long before accessibility for persons in wheelchairs was ever considered. So every Sunday, regardless of the weather, Joe pulled up to the circular gravel drive of the church in his van, helped his wife from the back seat into the wheelchair, and wheeled her through the gravel and up a small hill to the rarely-used side entrance to the church sanctuary. There were there were fewer steps – five. Vester Fortner was always waiting for Joe at the door. Vester held the handles on the back of the chair and Joe grabbed the bars at the legs, and they rolled his wife up backward one step at a time.

There were no cut-out spots in the rows of pews for easy access, so Joe would sit on the end of the back pew, and she would sit in her wheelchair beside him in the center

aisle, leaving just enough room for folks to squeeze by on their way in, most of them stopping to say hello. At the end of the service, the pattern repeated itself in reverse.

I hate to admit it, but I never fully understood how hard it must have been for them until our daughter was recently unable to put any weight on her feet for several weeks due to a foot surgery. When we brought her home from the surgery, I tried pulling her up the two steps into our front door and almost tossed her off the front of the chair onto the concrete. I thought, “This is hard.” I watched and tried to aid her in getting up the fifteen steps, with a hard right turn on a landing, to her bedroom, basically crawling. I thought, “I’m glad this is only for a few weeks.”

Imagine eighteen years. Imagine a lifetime.

And then imagine a voice, calling you over. A hand touching the back of your head. Something in the touch shocks you into an awareness of a presence. Suddenly, muscles you had not used in eighteen years are contracting, trying to move your back, and your spine, seemingly permanently bent beneath the weight of the world, straightens.

And then you look into his eyes. When was the last time you looked into someone’s eyes? The world that was constricted and narrow is now opened before you, abundant and generous. Your perspective is radically altered, widened. You see the clouds moving in the blue sky, you see the unique contours of people’s faces, right side up. You see the scroll, with its ancient promises, opened before you, its silver crown gleaming in the light. And you do all you know to do, all that can be done in this liminal moment when heaven touches earth, when God moves – “praise God from whom all blessings flow!”

It is the Sabbath day, and Doxology, praise, is flowing from her mouth as she looks to the left and to the right, up and down, she is speaking the most basic prayer, the prayer that begins all prayer, the prayer that lies at the heart of Sabbath: “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

She is invisible most of the time, easy to overlook, literally.¹ The synagogue leader may not even know what she looks like, certain not what she looks like upright and singing. The only thing he ever saw, if he saw her at all, was the top of her head leading the way. But now he hears her praise, he sees her face. Still, he does not address her, but instead the crowd. He accuses her indirectly of coming to the synagogue to be healed, when in fact the text says nothing of the sort. She has come to the synagogue to worship.

¹ Karoline Lewis, *The Text This Week*, 2013.

She doesn't notice Jesus – how could she, bent as she was? Jesus notices her. She doesn't ask to be healed; Jesus heals her in an act of free grace.

The synagogue ruler addresses the crowd, but this woman is the one he means to hear it, Jesus is the one he means to hear it. “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.”

Now here is where we need to be careful. It would be very easy for us to climb up on our seats of judgment and proclaim the ruler to be the bad guy here, the one who just doesn't get it, who elevates the law above grace. But the truth is that the Sabbath was and is a central tenet of the Jewish faith, and now the Christian faith as well. It is still important to set aside time in which we cease from work, cease from producing, cease from all the efforts we make to secure ourselves; one day when we remember, by ceasing from our work, that we are not God, that we are created, and that the world can get along just fine without our sweat and toil and effort. The ruler of the synagogue, to the extent he was lifting the importance of Sabbath, was not doing a bad thing.

Yet Jesus calls him a hypocrite just the same. This word is distinctive in Luke's Gospel. “Hypocrite is always the charge Jesus levels in this Gospel at those who are blind to the real meaning of things, those who cannot perceive their own weakness and cannot discern the present evidence of God's rule.”²

And that evidence is all around in Jesus. Wherever Jesus goes, people are unbound – from diseases, from social norms that create insiders and outsiders, from interpretations of religious practices that keep people like this woman bent and broken when God wants them to be free. And with a simple analogy that everyone in the crowd immediately understands, Jesus puts the ruler to shame. “You allow for your animal to be untied and led to water on the Sabbath, and yet would keep this daughter of Abraham bound on the Sabbath.”

The Sabbath was given to set people free. This is what happens when God shows up; those who are bowed down stand up straight. When that happens, no matter what day of the week it is, Sabbath has arrived, God's kingdom has come on earth as it is in heaven. And the only appropriate response is praise.

This is ultimately the hypocrisy of the leader of the synagogue and is all-too-often our hypocrisy as well. He fails to see that the true meaning of Sabbath is the meaning it has held all along. We stop working, we rest, as an acknowledgement that the world is

² Charles B. Cousar, Texts for Preaching. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), p. 485.

not sustained by our efforts, but by God's grace. We make room to feel that grace, to rest in it, to be empowered by it, to be released back into the world with a new perspective. This woman, bent for eighteen years, is seen – *really seen* – in a moment of sheer grace. No one is working in her but God. That is Sabbath rest, pure and true.

When she stands up straight, she praises God. And she left that synagogue on the Sabbath in a unique position to see others who are also weighed down, bent beneath heavy burdens, perspectives narrowed and constricted, longing for healing. She left with the opportunity to be an agent of God's Sabbath to others.

We are all of us either being bent down or lifted up. In Christ, Sabbath is loosed into the world, so that when we are lifted up we might lift others, and when we are bent down, we might receive the grace that comes outside ourselves. Whether it is as far away as Syria, as close as Baton Rouge, or under our own roof, we are in a position to give Sabbath grace or receive Sabbath grace. When my father died recently, in those moments I felt bent over with the weight of it all, so many of you, with your words, your food, your permission to take time, to grieve, were agents of God's Sabbath for me, helping me stand back up.

All of it, whether you are giving or receiving, is grace, undeserved, free, showering upon us as we are seen and touched and stand up straight and praise. This is God's work, Sabbath work, in us and through us and sometimes in spite of us.

May this house be dedicated to that Sabbath rest and grace, now and forever.
Amen.