

Martha C Langford  
First Presbyterian Church, La Grange Texas  
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Luke 13:10-17

# Unbound

The monochrome billboards were a unique—if anonymous—advertising campaign named God Speaks. They sprang up in Florida and were adopted by the Outdoor Advertising Association as a national public service campaign.

Appearing on Texas highways in 1999, the first sign read “I love you... I love you... I love you. - God.”

Although never a billboard, alternative “God speaks” phrases have appeared on bumper stickers and the internet. The one that comes to mind, “I didn’t call them the 10 suggestions. - God.”

The fourth commandment given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, instructs us to: “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy” (Exodus 20:8). That’s where our scripture takes us this morning—between the assurance of God’s love and obedience to God’s command.

Sabbath was a serious subject for religious leaders in the first century. It encompassed a rhythm of life built into the people’s understanding of creation. In Genesis we read, “on the seventh day God completed his work... So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation” (Genesis 2:2-3).

In Judaism, this is considered the culmination of creation—not the shaping of human-beings on the sixth day, but God’s action in setting aside the seventh day as a holy day. In creation, God makes time itself sacred. Then on Mount Sinai, God commands the people to remember that act—by keeping the Sabbath day holy.

This morning’s text invites us to talk about the importance of Sabbath.

On a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, my tour group traveled to Palmyra, Syria. I remember thinking it so ODD that my first sight of Roman ruins came in a Middle Eastern country. It was a powerful reminder of the cultural colonization that blanketed the world under Greek and Roman rule.

Rome brought its pantheon and its entertainments, its bathhouses and theaters, its hippodrome and arena, its style of dress and social stratification and its form of government.

To be a Roman colony was to become *Romanized*.

Rabbis and priests, pharisees and scribes, and ordinary Jews had to resist the inexorable pull of conformity with Rome. To ensure their survival as a people, they had to help their children grow in the patterns of faith and life established at Sinai. They had to teach and reinforce the mitzvah—the commandments that guided one’s relationship to God and to each other and to the earth.

In his book, *The Sabbath*, Rabbi Abraham Heschel describes Judaism as a religion that teaches one “to be attached to holiness in time... to sacred events...”<sup>1</sup>

Those first-century Jews needed to find themselves woven into the narrative of the biblical story. Rituals and celebrations, the things of daily life **and** the observance of Sabbath connected and reconnected them with their identity as a people of God.

Heschel continues, “Ancient rabbis felt the Sabbath demands all of man’s attention, the service and single-minded devotion of total love... [They were] compelled to enlarge constantly the system of laws and rules of observance.”<sup>2</sup>

We know that Pharisees were among those who expanded the systems of laws surrounding Sabbath. They were seeking to hold the line against encroaching Hellenization; seeking to survive as a people under the rule of Rome.

Luke tells us that Jesus had several confrontations with the powers that be over his conduct on the Sabbath. And in this story, unique to Luke’s gospel, we join Jesus on a Sabbath day at an anonymous local synagogue. As is his pattern, Jesus is engaged in teaching the people... well, the law.

In the middle of the lesson, a woman appears. Bent over by weakness—whether osteoporosis or scoliosis or some other disease—she makes her way into the teaching space. Jesus sees her. With compassion, he calls out to her, “woman you have been unbound from your weakness.” Then Jesus touches her and she “was straightened and glorified God.”

The local synagogue chief—the one who is responsible for nurturing the people in their faith—is INDIGNANT. This action, this healing, has violated his sense of proper conduct, violated his understanding of the law.

It’s interesting that he doesn’t address his anger at Jesus but begins to harangue the crowd.

*What is wrong with you people. Six days, there are six days in which work is properly done. Come on one of these days to be healed and NOT on the day of the Sabbath.*

You can imagine it, some of the people begin to nod in agreement. He’s right...

And yet he’s wrong.

This is the second week running that Jesus has called someone a hypocrite. This time he addresses the whole crowd. Arguing from the lesser to the greater, he reminds them that they take care of their livestock on the Sabbath giving food and water as an act of mercy. And how, he asks might one imagine that this “daughter of Abraham” was less deserving of mercy than the animals?

Those opposing him were shamed, yet, the remainder of the crowd rejoiced in his power and in his work and in the ways that he delivers one of their own to freedom.

As a kid, I can remember thinking that Pharisees and Jewish leaders were loveless tyrants. What I didn’t understand was their desperate struggle for survival.

I didn’t understand the monumental effort it takes to stand against a dominant culture. I didn’t begin to comprehend the dangers until the birth of my daughter. Couldn’t know what it meant until I tried to raise Carolyn to resist a culture that measures individual worth by one’s productivity and possessions and not by our common creation in the image of God.

Rabbi Heschel talks about the realities of our modern lives. Our culture is based in things. We amass “stuff” as a means to ensure survival and then amass more “stuff” to gain power and control. We become enslaved to our stuff and the acquisition of things. Our insatiable pursuit of more causes us to exploit the earth and to exploit one another.

This is why—*Sabbath*.

On the seventh day, God crafted the realm of time into a holy space, “where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord.”<sup>3</sup>

It is through Sabbath, that God’s people tune themselves to the purposes of God.

AND this is exactly what Jesus demonstrates on the Sabbath. Unbinding the daughter of Abraham, Jesus calls us: to remember our place in the story, to give release from crippling burdens, to engage others with compassion reflective of God’s love.

Theologian Emilie Townes notes that Luke wedges this story between a parable of repentance and a parable about the invasive, uncontrollable in-breaking of the kingdom of God. She considers this story a challenge for us—to live into our healing at the hands of a merciful God. To consider how we “live the healthy and healing witness that God would have us live.”<sup>4</sup>

God gives us this moment—between repentance and the in-breaking kingdom—to remember God’s love and God’s grace and God’s mercy.

Friends, we too struggle to retain our identity as God’s people. In the face of our 21-century cultural juggernaut; the gifts of Sabbath—as practiced by Jesus—become vital to our everyday lives.

Thursday was “meet the teacher” night here at First Church. The St James Preschool staff welcomed parents and children into this space for the first time. In the days and months ahead, some seventeen families will experience Christian nurture for their children right here in our space.

As we have made the necessary preparations and covenantal agreements these words seemed to be a guiding light: *not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord...*

Sabbath teaching—reaching beyond our congregation, beyond the St James congregation, and even beyond the children as a witness for our community.

You too have stories of Sabbath, of places where this community has been unbound by the love and mercy of God. I encourage you to tell them to each other—as ways of noticing and rejoicing signs of the kingdom unfolding in our midst.

And may God continue to unbind us... our understanding and our imagination, our bodies and our souls, our capacity for sharing, and our love and mercy and kindness. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Heschel, Abraham. *The Sabbath*. New York: FSG, 1951. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Heschel. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Heschel. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Townes, Emilie M. “Theological Perspective on Luke 13:10-17.” *Feasting on the Word*. YR C. Vol 3. Louisville: WJK, 2010. 384.