Sunday, August 24, 2025

Sherri Matthew, Officiant

St. Thomas & Grace

Morning Prayer

Sermon

In the Gospel reading for today, we find Jesus speaking to a gathering of people in a synagogue. He calls forward a woman who has been disabled with a painfully bent back for the past 18 years, and heals her with a touch and the words, “woman, you are set free from your ailment.” The woman stands straight and celebrates her healing with praise to God; however, the synagogue leader sternly rebukes Jesus for healing on the Sabbath as an affront to God, and says that He could have done so on the other six days of the week, which are intended for work.

Haven’t we all, at one time or another, did something we knew was very much in the public good or to the benefit of another, only to be sharply reprimanded to our great shock and disappointment? After the astonishment wears off, you find yourself asking, why?!

So, why does the synagogue leader get so angry about Jesus for healing on the Sabbath? And why does both he and Jesus not directly address one another but the assembled congregation? What is really happening here?

In Jesus’ day, synagogues often functioned as town meeting halls, a place to present ideas to the community, to debate and to teach. Both he and Jesus are essentially two Jewish teachers, one traditional, the other progressive, debating the true meaning of the laws handed down to Moses by God. The synagogue leader views strict legalism as the correct way to honor the Sabbath. Jesus, on the other hand, interprets the original commandment “keep it holy” by the spirit rather than the letter of the law. He therefore gives grace and flexibility to its meaning, by healing a woman who has suffered for many years and has had no rest.

The synagogue leader is perhaps mindful of his people’s troubled history in Egypt, when they were slaves and there was no rest for them either. He might well want to protect the Sabbath day as one free from work and prevent any intrusions on it. But he’s so focused on preserving the law he’s forgotten the living, suffering woman standing before him.

Jesus knows this too and is well aware of the need for rest. But He also notes the hypocrisy of those who take their animals out on the Sabbath and lead them to water. The law has already been disregarded regularly in the community. In equal anger, Jesus points this out and the community overwhelmingly shows their enthusiastic approval.

We oftentimes have a limited perspective on things: our understanding of what is “good”, “righteous” and even “holy” are defined by what we know and have been taught. Not that these in themselves are imperfect, but that our comprehension of such can be. We each of us come to interpretations of texts from our own angle, for example, one person’s reading of Scripture can vary significantly from another’s.

Also limiting our acceptance of God’s good gifts is narrow thinking: a refusal to look at things from a creative, constructive point of view that permits growth and healing.

It’s ok to question “the rules” in a particular situation if they don’t support Jesus’ second commandment, which is to love your neighbor as yourself. Jesus “bent” the 4th commandment that Moses brought down from the mountain: “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy”. He was there for her, the woman who needed healing, regardless of what day of the week it was. Her praise and thankfulness in her newfound health was the smile of grace returned to God on His day.

A brief excerpt from today’s readings in Isaiah will be helpful here.

The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong. – Isaiah 58:11

*Continually. Every day. Even the Sabbath.*

And you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. – Isaiah 58:11

*Never fail.*

Luke doesn’t tell us whether the synagogue leader decided to accept healing on the Sabbath after his public conflict with Jesus. If he did, he might have changed his teaching to something like:

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, while loving your neighbor as yourself.”

Order of Morning Prayer

Jubilate BCP p. 82

16 The Song of Zechariah BCP p. 92

Suffrages A BCP p.97

Hymns

Introit: 8 Morning Has Broken

Gloria: 685 Rock of Ages, Cleft for Me

Postlude: 493 O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing