

Message: "Getting Things Backwards"

Scripture Lesson: Luke 13:10-17

10Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 11And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. 12When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." 13When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 14But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." 15But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? 16And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" 17When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

When I was a wee lad of the fifth or sixth grade, I remember an incident in Sunday School which struck me as momentous to my faith understanding. I was in the class where the teacher was talking about the Bible, what it was and how God gave it to us for faith and for life. I was, by that time, practically an expert in theology both for being a PK (that's Pastor's Kid, the son of a pastor) and for having attended Sunday School since I was just out of diapers - at least, I thought I had heard and seen all the Bible could give to me, from the stories of Adam and Eve to King David to Jesus and the disciples and even onto Paul and his journeys. But that particular day, I found myself surprised by a question the teacher asked us that caught me off guard - she asked us, "Do you believe in the Bible?" It was a surprising question to me at the time, because I had come to understand that the belief of faith centered on believing in Jesus, believing in God, and believing in the spirit. Believing in the Bible - now, what did that mean? Believing in a book, in a testimony, in the written accounts of various authors across hundreds if not a thousand years.....now, what did believing in such a thing mean?

Yes, I probably was one of those annoying students who wasn't satisfied with the obvious answers; and, of course, the obvious answer of any good Christian when asked, "do you believe in the Bible?" is "yes." But I'm afraid I retain my annoying mindframe of my Sunday School years, for I cannot help but recognize a common dilemma found within our faith expression - namely, substituting simple, convenient partial answers for more complex, deeper, and more solid truths. Today, when I hear someone ask me or others "Do you believe in the Bible," I don't think they are after a meaningful conversation regarding the heart of God or the progress of our personal faith. I think they are often looking for a reason to embrace or dismiss who they are talking to. Single issue voting is a similar

practice, whereby a person is assessed as to their character based on whether or not they hold a certain position (i.e., the "right" position) on a political issue, whether it be abortion, gun rights, capital punishment, the climate, or wealth equity. This is extended much more broadly when we think of our approach to other areas of human interest, like entertainment, sports, and extracurricular activities - for instance, who here likes the Griz? (now, be honest; I've seen the Griz flags flying from several cars parked in our alley lot on game weekends....) For those who raise their hands, how do you feel about the Cats? And, by extension, how do you feel about those who support the Cats? Playful as that rivalry might be, within such sentiments lie the seeds of judgement we are warned against - and the stakes only get higher as the issues become more life impactful. Indeed, we are in an age when it can be dangerous in certain contexts to identify ourselves as Republican or Democrat, as pro-vaccine or anti-vax, or climate change advocate or denier.

"Do you believe in the Bible?", however, is not a question with a yes or no answer. To treat it as such deprives the Bible of its greatest purpose of addressing the variety of people, contexts, histories, cultures, and experiences that the Bible exists for - and to rigidify its understanding along any one line is to abuse its contents. The Bible is meant to be wrestled with in the human context each one of us finds ourselves in; otherwise, we settle for much less than God has provided.

Take, for instance, the phrase "keep the sabbath holy." I can agree with that statement as a matter of faith, but it is a nearly meaningless statement unless we consider what it means to keep something holy. Does holiness mean reverence, or formality, or doctrinary adherence? Or does it mean something else?

Jesus addresses this understanding in our scripture lesson today. Jesus heals a woman afflicted with a crippling condition for 18 years, and he heals her on the Sabbath; this act is interpreted as work, and the Jewish leaders are quick to criticize Jesus. Jesus then lets them have it: "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? 16And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" His reply makes it clear that God's compassion is holier than any sabbath law.

It is hard not to think of another scripture passage when reading of this experience of Jesus healing the woman who had been crippled for 18 years; Jesus healed her on the sabbath, and was criticized for working on a holy day; but Jesus turns it right around and challenges the understanding of what is truly holy, lifting an act of compassion over ritual or tradition. He is basically living out his words in Mark 2:27: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath."

What an important distinction many Christians these days have lost sight of. We have made religion more important than faith; no, it goes further than that - in many ways, we have made religion independent of faith; I think about those who loudly claim the label "Christian" but fail to live or speak with integrity, who fail to embrace all as God's beloved children, who speak hatred instead of love, who rely solely upon a professed faith rather than a changed life of humility and service. There are so very many persons who proclaim their faith in Jesus but fail to express his grace and love in their lives. I find their proclamation problematic at best, delusional at worst.

The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath - this is the great reversal we still get wrong in our world. What comes first is not the sabbath, but what the sabbath is for - to encourage our connection to God. And what can be more connectional than being healed by the Almighty? This is why we must always be careful to ask ourselves continually the one question that matters more than pretty much any other question we can ask, and to ask it deeply, thoroughly, and sincerely of ourselves in all the things we do as people of faith. It is a one-word question that we often don't ask ourselves for fear of not having a good answer; but it is the one-word-question that is required to move towards good answers and better questions, all more sufficient for our lives.

And just what is that one-word question? "Why?"

Why do we need the sabbath? Why do we need to keep it holy? And What does it mean to keep something Holy?

Why do we believe in the Bible? What does it mean to believe in something?

Why do we come together as this fellowship? Why do we need each other in our body of Christ? What does it mean to need someone else in our lives? To need God?

Why do we do what we do in the church? Why do we have particular liturgies, sacraments, songs, prayers, and readings? Is it because God mandates a particular form for our worship? Or that particular contents of worship help us draw closer to God?

I leave you today with something that is a little different - a cartoon that has become one of my favorites. In the cartoon Jesus is explaining something simple to Bible-toting adults; it is not hard to imagine them being the Jewish leaders of our passage. Here is the cartoon:



Jesus says, "The difference between me and you is you use scripture to determine what love means, but I use love to determine what scripture means." Help us, Lord, to follow Jesus's lead.