

“The Sabbath Dilemma”  
 delivered Sunday, August 22, 2010  
 by Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor  
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 Luke 13:10-17  
 Rally Day

In the preface to her book about being aware of the presence of God in the ordinary stuff of life, Martha Sterne tells this story of a grocery store encounter. “I am in the Kroger, and I am looking at vinegars, very absorbed in the vinegars. And a woman is standing next to me, and she is yelling into her cell phone saying, “Darlin’, I don’t see the bacon ranch dressing. I see the buttermilk ranch, the chive ranch, the low-fat ranch, the regular ranch. I just don’t see the bacon ranch – no, not anywhere, darlin’ – don’t see it at all.” I look over and spot the bacon ranch. And I gently tap the lady and point and mouth ‘bacon ranch.’ She grabs it. She never acknowledges me, never looks at me, never says thanks or anything to me, but I hear her bellowing into the phone, “Darlin’, praise the Lord... I have found the bacon ranch. Praise the Lord!” Martha goes on: “I already have my face set to smile “you’re welcome,” so not to be noticed as the discoverer of the bacon ranch prize is irritating. Not to mention the fact that I have lost my way on my own personal quest in the vinegars.” And then, reflecting as the practical theologian she is as an Episcopal priest, Martha Sterne writes: “Even in the grocery store, I think, when people help you find what you are looking for, you need to say thanks. And then praise the Lord for giving you the people who help you. Sometimes we bray religious words past each other, and nobody finds what they are looking for. We can end up looking like – Praising the Lord and Ignoring Your Neighbor. Our piety is often self-absorbed instead of communal, and abstract instead of fleshed and blooded.” (1)

The abstract, self-absorbed practice of religion is what Jesus is after in our scripture this morning. Jesus heals a woman whose spirit is crippled, the gospel writer Luke tells us, which incites the leader of the synagogue to proclaim what one is supposed to do or not do on the Sabbath. Now, given the number of conflicts Jesus has with the Pharisees, it would be easy for us to jump to quick conclusions about this story, summing it up sort of like this: Here is Jesus fighting legalism again, opposing a kind of first-century Puritanism that puts rules ahead of people; it’s Jesus the liberator versus the synagogue leader, the enforcer. But this story runs deeper than that.

Amy-Jill Levine is a New Testament scholar at Vanderbilt, and she’s also Jewish. In her book *The Misunderstood Jew*, she reminds us how radical the idea of Sabbath was in the ancient world. In Jesus’ lifetime, ninety percent of the population was either indigent or what we would call the “working poor,” living just above subsistence. There were no labor laws, no regular workweek, no regular days off. Observing Sabbath made Jews stand out, because on the Jewish Sabbath, no one worked: not the wealthy, not their servants, not the poor, not even the farm animals. Everyone was entitled to a day of rest because God rested after the work of creation, and when the people of Israel were freed from slavery down in Egypt, God gave the Sabbath as a gift of freedom. To their credit, the Pharisees took seriously the commandment, “Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.” The Sabbath freed them from work in order to have a day to rest – a day to reflect on the gifts of life, to enjoy family, to praise God. Levine says that what we see in this story of Jesus healing the woman on the Sabbath is a very first-century Jewish dilemma. Is there a time when one “good” cause for Sabbath observance is outweighed by another? (2)

Yes, Jesus argues, and he uses a common analogy. You untie the farm animals and lead them to water on the Sabbath. Arguably that's work, but you do it because you don't want to harm them. How much more is it right to lead this woman from sickness to health, to straighten her bent back so that she can look up and look out and praise God!

You see, I think Jesus' interaction with both the woman and the leader of the synagogue is the same. He wants them both, and all of us, to be freed from an abstract, self-absorbed practice of religion, which can be so narrowly focused on me and my God. The Greek word that describes this woman's condition is *kyphotic*. It's a word that we still use today to describe a severe curvature of the spine. *Kyphotic* literally means "bent together" or "bent with." It means the woman is bent in upon herself. And the gospel text tells us quite plainly that her ailment isn't just physical – it's spiritual too – remember it says, "There appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years." The leader of the synagogue is also, in his own way, bent in upon himself. In his effort to be faithful with his rules of observing Sabbath he misses the very presence of God right in front of him – healing, showing compassion, breaking the rules.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus puts it this way: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath." By healing this woman, Jesus proclaims there is something more important than keeping Sabbath; more significant than religion itself. Indeed, what is more important than this or that religious observance is that to which religion points – the almighty, loving, healing, compassionate God of all creation. When Jesus is healing the woman with the bent over back in the synagogue, he is also seeking to heal its leader – to help them both, and all who were around watching and listening that day, and even us today – to stand up and look out and see God in our midst, and in the faces of one another, the children of God.

That, in its essence, is the celebration of Rally Day at Shandon Presbyterian Church. We don't trot out the new classes, and host a big breakfast, and decorate the tables, and get the choir practices going, and go back to two services simply because we want to fill up the church with people who are trying to be religious. It is no fun being around people who are simply bent in upon themselves, no matter how pious they may be. Rather, we want the church to be a place where all of us can un-bend from our self-absorption, and be free to look up and praise God, and see in the face of one another a neighbor, a brother, or sister in Christ. Sabbath observance was never intended to be a destination, but rather a resting place on the journey of life, a pause in the work week to remember who we are and whose we are, a time of renewal to bask with intention in the presence of God. The Sabbath was created to serve us, not the other way around.

When our family friend Ted Wardlaw was the pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in downtown Atlanta, near the end of one summer, his family was driving back downtown on a Sunday morning after having been on vacation for several weeks. His daughters Shelby and Claire, now college age, were about seven and four years old at the time. As they crested the hill downtown that brought the church roof and its steeple into view, the preacher Ted said, "there's our church." To which his bright and precocious Shelby said, "No Dad, that's God's church." And then four-year-old Claire piped up saying, "No ya'll, that's Miss Connie's church." Who was Miss Connie? Connie Riddle – her beloved Sunday school teacher, of course.

The celebration of Rally Day is not the beginning of a new program year that will help us be more religious. Today, we are being led by the healing presence of Jesus Christ to see that this is God's church – only in so far as it is Miss Patty's church, and Mr. Dan's church, and Mr. Bill's church, and Miss Peggy's church, and Miss Cathy's and Miss Anne's church, and Mr. Allen's and Miss Susan's church, and Mr John and Miss Katie's church. Because Jesus Christ wants the woman with the crippled spirit, and wants the Pharisee, and wants you and wants me,

to stand up on the Sabbath, to unbend, and look out to see the spirit of Christ himself in the faces of one another. So that together we can look up and praise God for all the blessings of life.  
AMEN.

#### NOTES

- 1) Martha Sterne, *Alive and Loose in the Ordinary*, p.1.
- 2) Amy-Jill Levine excerpt from Cynthia Campbell's sermon, "Office Hours?" preached at Fourth Presbyterian, Chicago, 8/26/07.