

**Sabbath Miracles**  
**Luke 13: 10-17**  
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What were you doing in 2015? Feels like a long, long time ago now. I was happily playing with a toddler, preaching most Sundays, and planning a kitchen renovation. But in 2015 there was a girl on the other side of the world, a teenager, who was making a decision I hope none of us ever have to make.

Yusra Mardini, a seventeen-year-old and high level swimmer, had just had her home destroyed by a bomb. Homeless, and without a safe future in her country of Syria, she and her sister decided to flee their home country, going through Lebanon and Turkey. There, they got on a boat built for six with eighteen other people, and headed for Greece. The boat's motor failed, and so heavily laden, it began to take on water. Yusra and her sister, along with two other people who said they knew how to swim well enough, got out of the boat, into the Mediterranean and spent over three hours swimming alongside and pushing and pulling the boat to safety. Everyone survived. Yusra and her sister, and eventually their parents ended up in Berlin, where Yusra continued her swimming and was selected for the Refugee Olympic Team.

I don't know about you, but I remember watching that Refugee Olympic Team at the 2016 Olympics with a strange mix of admiration and sadness. That there had to be a team like that at all – a refugee team - and imagining what they had experienced, what and who they had lost along the way. Who would not feel compassion toward those who keep going in spite of odds that appeared insurmountable? Who would not want to cheer for these fellow human beings?

I wonder if Jesus engaged that kind of imagination that day in that synagogue, as He reached out to the woman who had been bent over for eighteen years. Not twelve years, a long enough time in biblical numbers. Eighteen years of being more and more anonymous, as fewer and fewer people must have remembered her as she was. She doesn't approach Jesus, but she is in the synagogue, she is still making her way to worship, to pray, to be among her people however she can. She has not given up, this daughter of Abraham. Eighteen years. Past time, too long, overdue for a miracle.

And so it must be now. Jesus calls her over, says, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." He lays hands on her, which He often does not do, does not need to do, to heal someone. And immediately, she stood up straight and began praising God.

"Oh, no. Not today! Not now!" The leader of the synagogue has to step in. Notice he does not directly address Jesus, but turns his anxiety out onto to the crowd, the congregation, letting them know that this day, the Sabbath day, is never an appropriate

one to ask for the Lord's favor. Nope. Not today! Don't go over there for healing, for freedom, for joy. That's not the right way to spend the Sabbath! Maybe he was afraid of a stampede of the sick toward Jesus that morning. Would have ruined the order of worship, definitely. His job was to enforce the rules, and it has to be somebody's job to make sure things are done decently and in order, am I right, Presbyterians?

Oh my. We've been guilty of that, too, haven't we? Taking all the joy, all the life, all the freedom out of Sabbath time or other good gifts from God. I won't go into all the history of blue laws in our country, but it's just one more example of our human tendency to tradition, to legalize, something to death. Some of you may have those not-so-great Sabbath memories from childhood.

But now, oh Sundays. It is not so easy, maybe it never was, to carve out a morning, much less a day, to worship God, to rest, to take advantage of that strange and beautiful gift that God offers us in the Sabbath. More than offers us, He commands us to take hold of. Of course, for our Jewish friends the Sabbath is on Saturday, and we Christians most often observe Sunday as our Sabbath day, though we are well aware that not everyone has the privilege of telling their boss, of forming their own work week, and saying, "I'm not working on Sundays." Thanks be to God for all those who are working right now while we sit here, keeping our medical facilities running, driving ambulances, staffing gas stations, and keeping our lights on.

God certainly believes that taking a day and keeping it holy is important. It is one of the 10 Commandments given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, on that mountain full of clouds and mystery. It is one of the commandments, those best ways to live with God and one another, part of what forms us into people truly made by and reflecting God's image in the world. The fourth commandment, stated in Exodus 20, is to "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy."

Of all the commandments, the one about keeping the Sabbath holy is the longest, with the most explanation given. Aren't we supposed to take those commandments seriously, and maybe especially the longest one?

This wasn't the first time Jesus was, in popular view, breaking the law of the Sabbath, and publicly, flagrantly. The gospel writer Luke, in chapter 6 tells us that Jesus and His disciples had been pulling wheat from the stalks on the Sabbath, and he had cured a man with a withered hand on that Sabbath day, much to the consternation of religious authorities. Here's it's happening again: it almost seems like Jesus is seeking out opportunities to aggravate the leaders of the day.

That's where we run into a serious difference in the religious leader's scriptural interpretation, and the way that Jesus interprets Scripture. Jesus is not just breaking rules because He enjoys doing that, or to anger the crowds or draw attention to Himself.

Whenever Jesus broke the rules, it was to fulfill a greater command, and to truly live into what He saw as the intent of God's law.

Luke Powery, Dean of Duke University Chapel calls Jesus' actions in this story a prime example of "traditioned innovation." "Jesus works within a tradition, but he is not enslaved by it. He is free from it, though he respects it."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus, as He defends healing this daughter of Abraham, as He names her, appeals to the Sabbath command that is written in Deuteronomy. Like a lot of stories, such as the story of creation, the ten commandments are recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures in several places more than once. They are also found, not just in Exodus, but also in Deuteronomy 5, and in the list of the commandments in Deuteronomy, Sabbath keeping is justified in this way, it's a different justification:

"Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. *Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.* Therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."

The Sabbath command in Deuteronomy makes a direct connection between the Sabbath, a day of freedom, and the miracle of God freeing the people from slavery in Egypt. So Sabbath is rest, but not just rest. It is liberation. It is a reminder that we are free people. And the work of setting others free is always appropriate, especially appropriate, on the Sabbath day, for Jesus.

Jesus is not just our healer, but the One who sets us free. Jesus again and again chooses liberation for the bound, for the sick, for the unloved, over and against rules of purity and propriety, especially when these kinds of rules served to oppress those who were already victims, those who already had no standing in the community. He consistently stood with those who looked to be losing the race.

And so Jesus speaks a word of challenge into our lives. In a world that most often celebrates the young, the strong, the able bodied, the intelligent, the monied, Jesus breaks rules, human and divine, to unbind us, all of us, but especially those who are not first, who are not the fastest. So we can all be free. For we can truly enjoy God's good gifts only when they are not withheld from our neighbor, from the stranger, even from creation.

That's when community can happen. When this daughter of Abraham is set free, when she can meet the eyes of her community again, they understand her joy, and it is their joy, too. We see that gift of community happening in their midst, that joyful, shared

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<sup>1</sup> Luke A. Powery sermon on Luke 13:10-17: TGIF (faithandleadership.com) <https://faithandleadership.com/luke-powery-tgif> (accessed August 20, 2022).

celebration and recognition and understanding of the miracle that has just happened before them. After Jesus spoke, "The entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that Jesus was doing."

What a picture of the reign of God, when we are all rejoicing together when another one among us is set free, restored to themselves and to us and to God. That is the whole story, the whole goal of all creation.

Frederick Buechner, an incredibly gifted theologian, preacher, and writer of our time, died this week on Monday, at the age of 96. Buechner sometimes struggled and he was open about his struggles with this love/hate relationship with writing. He said this: "I have come to believe that there is only one plot. It has to do with the way life /or reality /or God—the name is perhaps not so important—seeks to turn us into human beings, to make us whole, to make us Christs, to "save" us—again, call it what you will. In my fiction and non-fiction alike, this is what everything I have written is about." To make us whole; to make us Christs.

That is what we are about, too. What I have seen in you, what I am thrilled to become part of among you at Westminster. That great longing to be community for one another, and to expand that circle of community in Christ's name, this experience of welcome, of healing love, of liberation, even, should we dare to say, of Sabbath miracles. After all, we are here, more are joining from afar, because we believe that God is still showing up, still reaching out to us, still has a holy hold on this world, and calls us to be part of it.

St. Augustine of Hippo, but often Desmond Tutu repeated it -- that with respect to God's work:

*By himself, God won't.  
By ourselves, we can't.  
But together with God, we can.*

We understand that this is hard work at times. Many times. Even sacrifice, of our own time, efforts, comfort, and traditions. But it is all joy. And I pray that in the coming moments and days, weeks and month together, we may share plenty good holy time, Sabbath time and miracles, together.

Maybe it's because we've just moved here to Pennsylvania, maybe because of this new call in ministry, but I've been thinking a lot about an old friend of mine, Rev. Scott Hauser. Scott and I served together for just one year when we were both on staff at Second Presbyterian in Indianapolis. Scott was from Pennsylvania, and passed away several years ago, not yet 40, of angiosarcoma. One of the many things I remember about him, and his wife Lara gave me permission to share this detail of his life, is that Scott always had \$200 cash in his pocket at all times. He'd picked up this life lesson from Carnegie Mellon professor Randy Pausch who talks about it in his famous Last Lecture. Scott said that he carried this money, which was a large amount of money for us brand-new pastors making presbytery minimum at the time. Scott's explanation was

that he had this money, “Just in case an incredible opportunity to set someone free or bring someone joy” presented itself. He’d used it to pay for someone’s groceries. He’d used it to buy spur-of-the-moment concert tickets for he and his wife. It was his way of living ready to make a connection, to share the generosity and joy and hopeful, expectant vigilance that he knew to be Christ’s intended pattern for our lives.

So may this be the pattern for your Sabbath, the pattern for our lives together: allowing Christ to restore us. Restore us to one another. Restore us to freedom. Restore us to joy. Restore us to God. Restore among us the miracle of Sabbath, that holy time that for so long we missed sharing together in person and for which we longed to share in person with even more. In which we remember that we are given not only for ourselves, but because the freedom of all things, including us, depends on it. May these Sabbath miracles abound for you, for me, in our life together, and in the whole of God’s world.

Amen.