

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Hebrews 12:18-29, Psalm 71, Luke 13:10-17
August 21, 2016
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Last week, you will remember Jesus was all about spewing fire and fomenting division. It was a little unsettling to many of us. We can be grateful that today he has returned to being the person we prefer. He shows compassion for the downtrodden and the unwell as he breaks a few of the rules and norms of his day to do it.

We can't help but notice, however, that what is so often the case with Jesus, someone – usually the leadership – doesn't take kindly to his actions. In this case, the leader of the synagogue becomes irate that Jesus performs a miracle that could have waited until the Sabbath was over. We might say he was bent out of shape for a moment because a woman who had been bent over for an eternity was finally able to stand upright. We can't really understand what all the fuss was about, can we?

For the most orthodox Jews, the Sabbath day laws had become very restrictive, and still are today. The original commandment found in Exodus 20 reads, "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it."

The key words here are holy and work. Keep the day holy and refrain from work. The question then became, what constitutes work? In Jesus' day, the healing he performed was considered by the most observant as work and, therefore, had to wait until after sundown when the Sabbath would be over.

Jesus considered the immediate healing of a woman, bound to look only at the ground for 18 years, to be God's will and by all means holy. Jesus was giving this woman a much needed rest after nearly two decades of suffering. What could have been more appropriate on the Sabbath?

It seems as though the rank and file members of the synagogue weren't of the same opinion as the leadership, and we're told they cheered and rejoiced. They are exceedingly glad for the woman, a member of their community, and pleased that Jesus has put the overbearing leadership in their place for once. Sometimes leaders want to call all the shots and get all the glory for themselves.

These strict Sabbath observances may remind some of us older members of the Blue Laws we grew up with. They actually were started back in colonial times as a means of enforcing religious standards in particular on Sundays, or the Christian Sabbath. Up until the 1960's in Virginia, all stores were closed except pharmacies. I read that the rise of malls and shopping as recreation finally turned the tide. The Blue Laws were deemed unconstitutional in Virginia in 1988, and only since 2008 have liquor stores been open at certain locations and for certain hours on Sundays.

While we have rightly relaxed our religious standards with regard to keeping the Sabbath, I wonder if we haven't perhaps become too casual about our observance of this holy day of rest. The root meaning of the word holy is "to set apart." Of course we set apart Sundays from the other six days of the week by going to church. But then what? How is the rest of the day set apart? How do we leave the world God created in God's care until Monday morning when the work week begins anew?

Except for leading worship and maybe visiting some parishioners after church, once I get home, I have decided for myself that I won't engage in anything I consider to be work. For me that means no yard work or house work. I also gladly neglect my evening routine of exercises for one night. I might tend to my fish pond or my bonsai plants because they are my hobbies. We may do something recreational in nature, and I almost always watch some sports, casually read the Sunday paper and nap on the couch.

It's up to each one of us to decide how best to keep the fourth commandment as a way of honoring God and acknowledging for one day at least that God can run the world without us.

You've heard it said, "Give it a rest." It usually means we are obsessing over something that is getting on someone else's nerves. Sunday is a good time to consider just what in our lives needs a rest. What can I let go of and give to God's custody? Monday through Saturday will always go better when we have observed the Sabbath rest.

I couldn't help but think of one of my favorite movie personalities, James Bond, when I first read the verses from the letter of the Hebrews for today. With all that shaking going on, who can forget that 007 liked his martinis "shaken, not stirred."

In the course of our lives, there will be times when we are shaken to the core of our being. Unplanned and unintended events will knock us off our feet. Major changes and transitions such as moving or retirement can challenge our equilibrium.

Using an obscure verse from the prophet Haggai, the author of Hebrews writes that, "Yet once more I (God) will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven." The author goes on to say that this shaking can be used by God to help us establish an unshakable faith. It is similar to the

parable about the house built on sand as compared to the one built on the rock. The house on the sand will be swept away when the storms of life come our way. In today's psalm, we asked the Lord to be our strong rock.

God doesn't wish severe adversity or harm upon any of us, and yet God seems to know that life in this world is precarious and fragile. How important it is to know that nothing can separate us from the love of God and that our truest self is always found in the Lord. We can lose everything, but God will never lose us.

I was moved by the two American synchronized divers, who early last week won silver medals at the Olympics. Of course, they were happy to have done so well, but the first thing they said when interviewed was that winning or losing didn't matter because their identities were in Christ first and foremost.

Life's circumstances at times will try and get the best of us and bend us over toward the ground. Jesus has come and given us people in and out of the church to hold us, stand with us and help us turn up toward the light again. AMEN.