Today we are with Jesus in the synagogue on the Sabbath as he is teaching. It might seem like a familiar scene to us, and it is. Jesus begins his ministry in Luke in a synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath day, as he quotes Isaiah. (Luke 4:18-21)

*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,*

 *because he has anointed me*

 *to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives*

 *and recovery of sight to the blind,*

 *to let the oppressed go free,*

*to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

*And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”*

That, if you remember was a bit controversial. “Is this not Joseph’s son?”, they mumbled amongst themselves, and then the Nazarites tried to throw him off a cliff.

Today is no less controversial as Jesus, in the midst of preaching and teaching, Jesus “sees” a woman, bent over and crippled for many years in such a way as to hide her face from the world. He draws her in from the margin of the congregation, heals her, and then, as controversy arises, affirms her identity as a Child of Abraham, a true child of God in the Jewish tradition.

Synagogue leader admonishes the people– “Don’t come to the synagogue on the Sabbath for healing.”

It is worth mentioning - Romans saw the Jewish Sabbath, and the rest from labor on that day, as a sign of Jewish indolence. So maybe there is a seed of defensiveness to the synagogue leader’s feverish attempts to keep a strict observance of Sabbath. A need to protect traditions of that congregation from criticism. After all, here is this visiting preacher/teacher that is pushing the boundaries of traditional sensibilities.

And note, the leader does not admonish Jesus, but the people coming to see him. This really sounds like the synagogue leader is trying to protect both the sanctity of Sabbath, as he understands it, and himself and his congregation from criticism.

But I think that what Luke is getting at here is not so much about challenging tradition or making a negative example of a certain theology, but perhaps the challenge is more about how some of our closely held practices, if left unexamined, might leave others behind or excluded from the community in some way. And perhaps Jesus is pushing us too, to ask just how Sabbath is practiced in our own lives.

I’d like to spend some time today thinking about Sabbath and how that might inform our reading today and also to consciously resist a simplistic reading of the gospel as a denigration of 1st century Judaism. As one writer reflects, *“Jesus engages in genuine debate with the leaders, treating them as people who share a similar passion to his for understanding God and living faithfully.” (*Lawrence, 2016, disclosing new worlds.net) Jesus’ argument with the leader is not so much about the finer points of the Law, but about the heart of the Law itself. Though Jesus’ tone in Luke is often confrontational, I can see how in some way, his engagement with the leader is an attempt to spiritually draw him in from his own place on the margin.

I’m drawing today from reflections by Presiding Bishop Curry on *The Way of Love Podcast*, and also from a lovely book recommended by Bishop Rob at a recent clergy gathering. *The Sabbath*, *Its Meaning for Modern Man*, by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. I present their thoughts here as though in conversation with each other.

**Bp. Curry** –– “Sabbath not so much a day off or a time to go to sleep, but to abide in God, enter into the rest of God’s presence. Book of Hebrews Jesus says, – “Abide in me as I abide in you” It is almost to be in complete harmony, in the depth of relationship. It’s almost to be like, and this is probably a silly example, but if you can think of a time when you’ve ever like really been ga-ga-goo-goo in love with somebody, and you spend time with them and you talk, whether it’s on the phone or in person, have you ever noticed how you had no consciousness of the time? That is to dwell deeply with that person. To enter into God’s Sabbath, God’s Sabbath rest is to dwell so deeply that you forget about time. “

**Rabbi Heschel** - “The love of humankind for the Sabbath is the love for what he and God have in common.” (16)

“We would expect the Bible to tell us that God finished his work on the 6th day. But, if we note Gen 2:2 – we will see that it is on the 7th day, not the 6th, that God finished his work. The ancient rabbis concluded there was an act of creation on the 7th day. Just as heaven and earth were created in 6 days, *menuha*, or rest was created on the 7th, and God then called it holy. And with the creation of *menuha*, the universe was complete.” (para, 22)

**Bp. Curry** - That’s why at the end of Genesis, in the poetry of the Creation, on the 6th day God saw all that God had made and said, “it is very good”.

***R. Heschel –*** Yes, and God called the 7th day *Gadosh* (holy/hallowed) after God’s work was finished and rested, God “set apart” this time to be held as different from the other times.

**Bp. Curry -** The high point of that Creation was, “And God rested on the seventh day.” It wasn’t that God took a nap after seven days of hard work, is that God was whole….. and at peace…. with himself…..and with what he had made…..That is the genius of Sabbath. There is a point you’ve just got to stop and let the rest happen.”

**R. Heschel** - So, God performed in three ways on the Sabbath. God rested – God blessed – God hallowed – and God so loved all that was done. The Sabbath for us is a foretaste of paradise, a sense of longing. How we behave the other six days of the week are a pilgrimage to the Sabbath. So that Sabbath is not an interlude, but the climax of living. Sabbath becomes for us a day for the sake of life.

**R. Heschel -** Ancient rabbis knew that excessive piety may endanger the fulfillment of the law. “There is nothing more important, according to the Torah. Than to preserve human life….Even when there is the slightest possibility that a life may be at stake one may disregard every prohibition of the law….One must sacrifice mitzvot (commandment/religious duty) for the sake of man, rather than sacrifice man for the sake of mitzvot.” (17)

**Jesus -** “The Sabbath is made for man, rather than man for the Sabbath.” (Mark 2, Matt 12, Luke 6)

**R. Heschel -** “The Sabbath is a reminder of two worlds – this world and the world to come; it is an example of both worlds. For the Sabbath is joy, holiness, and rest. Joy is a part of the world; holiness and rest are something of the world to come.” (19)

If we come back to Isaiah, in the verses directly before what we read today, the writer points out the “acceptable fast” that leads to delight in the Lord.

* Feed the hungry
* Let the oppressed go free
* Break every yoke of injustice
* House the homeless
* Clothe the naked

What we are seeing today in the healing of the crippled woman is God’s work in Jesus – bringing the reign of God in healing power to those that need it. The woman’s joy and praise of God’s healing power, shown in Jesus, is carried through to the crowd’s enthusiasm and delight at what they witness. It cannot be contained. Her healing brings about a wider healing in the community.

In our Sabbath observance, as we journey to the Table for holy nourishment, may the work of Christ in this place, open us heart, mind, body and soul to God’s acceptable fast.

**R. Heschel -** “Six days a week we wrestle with the world, wringing profit from the earth; on the Sabbath we especially care for the seed of eternity planted in the soul. The world has our hands, but our soul belongs to someone else.” (p.13)

I am reminded of this portion taken from Eucharistic Prayer C, *“Open our eyes to see your work at hand in the world about us. Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal. Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may serve the world in his name.”* (BCP, Eucharistic Prayer C, p. 372)

Amen.

Resources:

Heschel, Abraham Joshua, *The Sabbath*, *Its Meaning for Modern Man.* Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, NY, NY, 1951.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) was internationally known as a scholar, author, activist, and theologian. He was Professor of Ethics and Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America.

Podcast, *The Way of Love., Episode 3, Rest*. https://wayoflove.episcopalchurch.org. Quotes from Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. 2019.