

SERMON: Laboring on the Sabbath
TEXT: Luke 13:10-17

8-28-22

It was May of 1997, and I was nine months pregnant with my second child, my daughter Shelby. I had a dream one night that my water broke and I went into labor. On a Sunday morning. At church. In the middle of worship. While I was preaching the sermon. On this verse from Romans, Chapter 8: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now."

It's funny now. But I was terrified at the time. The dream did not come true, thanks be to God. If it had, the worship service would have been ruined. Oh, it would have been memorable, that's for sure. But, unless the music director had saved it by asking the congregation to sing the hymn, "Come Labor On," it would have ended quite abruptly. The sermon, left unfinished. The Prayers of the People, completely forgotten. Communion untouched. The Offering, left in people's purses and pockets. It's really my worst nightmare.

In fact, for as long as I have been a pastor, I've had anxiety dreams on a regular basis, most of them having to do with my arriving in worship completely unprepared.

I consider preaching and leading worship the most important thing I do as a Pastor. And most churches, when looking for a pastor, also put it high on their list of priorities. We all want excellent worship services. We are a lot like Goldilocks in the home of the three bears. The music should be not too loud and not too soft, but just right. Prayers should be not too worldly and not too personal, but just right. The sermon should be not too academic and not too conversational, but just right. And all of it put together ought to be not too long and not too short! Tie it up with a bow and get everybody to the restaurants before the Baptists.

Going to temple on the Sabbath for the Jews is like Sunday morning worship for Christians. It is a time to step away from the routine and busy-ness of our daily lives to honor and worship

God. In fact, Sabbath was an even greater priority for Jews than going to church is for most Christians.

As we read in the lesson from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus would occasionally teach in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And on this particular occasion, right in the middle of his teaching, a woman appeared. Now just the fact that she was a woman would make the all-male crowd take notice. But more than that, this poor woman was bent over, completely unable to stand up straight. When she walked, she could see only the ground, only people's feet, maybe up to their knees. Luke explains that she had been crippled like this for eighteen years.

"Jesus saw her," Luke wrote. He saw her, and - without having to ask any questions - he had compassion for her. He acknowledged her suffering. He called her to him and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

But the leader of the synagogue was appalled and indignant, because the Sabbath worship service had been so rudely interrupted. Right in the middle of his teaching, Jesus stopped and healed this woman. He did not ignore her. He did not make a mental note to himself to find her after the service. He did not motion discreetly to one of his disciples or the synagogue leader to usher her out quietly.

Jesus stopped mid-sentence - interrupted the community's worship of God - to demonstrate what worshipping God really looks like. In our minds, Jesus did the right thing. He didn't waste a moment before responding to her need.

On the other hand, if I had been the synagogue leader, I would have been more than a little upset, just as he was. I don't have a problem with his compassion; of course, Jesus was right to heal her. But seriously, after eighteen years, she couldn't have waited another 20 minutes?

It's really a double whammy for the synagogue leader. Labor of any kind was prohibited on the Sabbath, not just during temple worship, but for a full 24-hours. So, he was trying to uphold the law when he said, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." Not only has Jesus allowed this woman to interrupt the sacred worship of God, but he is also guilty of LABORING ON THE SABBATH.

Notice also, that the synagogue leader doesn't speak directly to Jesus about his complaint. Instead, he speaks to the crowds, hoping to stir them up or in an attempt to garner support for himself. This transgression is another sermon for another time.

Jesus responds to the synagogue leader in kind; rather than taking him aside for a private conversation, Jesus speaks to all who might oppose him. "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? And 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?" Instead of telling her she can wait, Jesus is telling this woman that she matters. Jesus makes her the priority and responds immediately, allowing her suffering to continue not a moment longer.

You may remember Luke's account of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, when Jesus was teaching on the Sabbath day in the synagogue at Nazareth. He stood up and read from the prophet Isaiah: "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." Then he said, "Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

"To release the captives. To let the oppressed go free." To heal this bent-over woman and liberate her from eighteen years of bondage. This is his very purpose. This is why Jesus was sent by God. So, he didn't really *interrupt* worship at all. He expanded

it. He demonstrated it. He brought his teachings to life, showing what true worship looks like.

Many years later, it finally occurs to me that my nightmare - if carried out to its logical conclusion - would have ended as a dream come true. If I had gone into labor during my sermon, and the worship service ended abruptly, what was the most important thing? That we didn't get to sing a closing hymn? That communion was left on the table? Or that a new life was dawning?

Jesus had his priorities straight, and was making the point that new life and healing and freedom are true expressions and actual demonstrations of worship. As Matthew 25 tells us, "when you did it to the least of these, you did it to me."

So, I pray that our worship of God here in this place, brings Jesus to life for you. I pray that our worship of God here in this place is a time of healing for you. I pray that our worship of God

here in this place sends the message that you matter. And I pray that when we leave this place, our worship of God continues as an extension of all that we have received.

I pray that the new life we find here energizes us to bring new life to others out there. I pray that the healing we receive here inspires us to seek healing for others out there. I pray that the love and acceptance we feel here opens our hearts to love and accept others out there.

This really would be a dream come true... to the glory of God!

AMEN.