

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 25/8/2019 - 8am only

Jeremiah 1:4-10

Psalm 71:1-6

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

A wise person once said the following: “Law helps order our world, but grace is what holds the world together.” (repeat). There’s a lot of truth in that short statement, I think. After all, I don’t think we could reasonably argue, in today’s age and in the context of today’s world, that some sort of law is not necessary, in order to keep our society together, to maintain order, and to give us at least a modicum of personal safety.

And yet, we see all too often how people so obsessed with the law are unable to find any room at all for anything other than what we might describe as the “strict letter of the law”. It is, for these people, black and white. There is only right or wrong.

So it is with one of the major players in today’s Gospel passage - the Synagogue leader. But I think we need to be careful before we rush to judgment of this man. Because what he offers is actually a clear and compelling reading of the law. He is, in one sense, *right*: you are not supposed to do any work on the Sabbath.

Sabbath is a day for rest and renewal, and any sort of negative views we take toward the various “restrictions” associated with the Sabbath would have been very foreign to the Israelites. Keep in mind that the law -- including laws about the Sabbath -- was given to the Israelites after their Exodus from Egypt. And so when they receive a command to rest -- to actually set aside one day of the week to rest their bodies and their livestock and retreat for a time of renewal and prayer -- trust me, they heard this only as good news.

By the way, and not for today's sermon, but I often wonder if we wouldn't be better off taking Sabbath more seriously. We aren't slaves, certainly not in the way that the Israelites were or some people still are, but certainly plenty us have to work long hours and sometimes more than one job to make ends meet. And many more of us have a harder and harder time disconnecting from work -- from emails or texts or the endless grind of a 24/7 world that never stops. Life, for people at all levels of the economic ladder, is both hectic and demanding. Might we also benefit from a proscribed time of rest?

Which is what the leader of the synagogue is worried about. Once you start making exceptions for this reason or that, pretty soon no one is really keeping the Sabbath and it's lost its point altogether. And it's not just the Sabbath. The whole law is like that -- keep making exceptions and it's not really a law anymore; it's more like a suggestion, with little or no power to protect and preserve us.

And this sense is alive and prevalent today within the church,. I can tell you. It's known as the "slippery slope" principle - and some will be quick to tell you all about it - "oh, we can't possibly bring in a discussion to Synod about assisted dying - otherwise pretty soon we will be choosing who to euthanize, and everyone will want to do it!!" And you certainly can't think about marriage equality. After all, if you allow same sex attracted people to marry, what's to stop people who are blood relations getting married - or a 65yo choosing to marry a 14yo! There it is, there are some laws we feel you should just keep. Period. And if you don't, who knows what will unravel next?

And that's exactly what this well-intentioned, law-abiding leader of the synagogue believes. But his isn't the only perspective. So now let's turn to the woman, she who has viewed the world from waist level for years, she who hasn't been able to look anyone in the eye for as long as she can remember. She is, I imagine, also a faithful, law-abiding member of this very synagogue. After all, she's right there that Sabbath, in spite of her condition, worshiping with her community.

And who knows, perhaps she also harbored concerns about keeping the Sabbath. Maybe she was downright conservative in her approach to the law more generally. We don't know. But I can only imagine the sense of overwhelming relief and gratitude when Jesus approached and healed her, when he called her a daughter of Abraham and restored her to full health. What were those first breaths of air like, taken in by lungs no longer cramped from stooping over? And whose eyes did she first meet, as she stood up straight for the first time in anyone's memory.

Or maybe, more importantly, what happened to all those laws and rules and concerns and regulations? Did they fall away, as if they were of no importance? No. They were just suspended, perhaps temporarily forgotten, in those first few moments of sheer grace and gratitude.

Which is always the way it is with law. The law matters because it helps us order our lives and keep the peace. The law matters because it sets needed boundaries that create room in which we can flourish. The law matters because it encourages us -- sometimes even goads us -- to look beyond ourselves so that we might love and care for our neighbor.

But as important as law is -- and notice that Jesus doesn't set aside the law but rather offers a different interpretation of it - the law must always bow to mercy, to life, to freedom. Law helps us live our lives better, but grace creates life itself. Law helps order our world, but grace is what holds the world together. Law pushes us to care for each other, but grace restores us to each other when we've failed in the law.

Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God, and while the law helps us make sense of and get more out of life in the kingdom of the world, it must always bend to the grace that constitutes the abundant life Jesus proclaims. For above and beyond all the laws ever received or conceived, the absolute law is love: love God and love your neighbor. Or, perhaps, love God by loving your neighbor.

And so of course Jesus heals on the Sabbath. And of course the healed woman gives thanks. And of course the crowd rejoices. That's what always happens when grace invites us simultaneously to value the law and at times suspend it out of mercy, compassion, and love.

Commands and promises, good news that comforts and challenges, law and gospel. Nothing is simple or straightforward. Nothing. Only one thing, in fact is - God who gave the law out of love continues to love us and all the world, no matter what.

Amen