

Message for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (8/21/2022)
Luke 13:10-17

Late August marks the anniversary of “Landing Day,” the sale of the first enslaved Africans on American shores in 1619. Their captors had originally stolen about 350 people from West Africa, but as many as half of them died en route, the first of millions who did not survive the Middle Passage. The crew of a second ship took some of the surviving captives on board and landed at Point Comfort in what would become Virginia, where they traded twenty-some people for food.¹ This exchange marks the onset of two hundred fifty years of systematic dehumanization and exploitation on the basis of race in the American colonies and the United States. Twelve generations of African people living on this land were enslaved.

Slavery was outlawed one hundred fifty years ago, nevertheless people of African descent have borne the burden of its legacy – intimidation and violence; legal repression; unequal access to housing, education, and employment; disparities in criminal justice; disproportionate incarceration; and persistent casual prejudice. Over the course of American history, racism has repeatedly transformed itself, and thus it has survived. It is, to borrow Jim Wallis’ term, “America’s original sin.”

It’s not easy to talk about. And, those of us who’d rather ignore the role that race continues to play in American life may bristle at those who insist on bringing

¹ E.R. Shipp, “1619: 400 years ago, a ship arrived in Virginia, bearing human cargo,” <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/investigations/2019/02/08/1619-african-arrival-virginia/2740468002/>.

it up. We resist acknowledging and addressing the whole truth of our nation's history. But, the ongoing movement for civil and human rights demands that we face the interrelated problems of racism head on and with an eye to changing both our hearts and our systems.

Of course, there is compelling precedent for this work. In April 1963, Pastor Martin Luther King, Jr. was arrested for his leadership of the movement for change in Birmingham, Alabama. At the time of those protests, eight fellow clergymen, none of whom were Black, published a statement criticizing King's strategy of direct action: "We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely." It was a classic case of paternalism, that is, presuming to dictate to oppressed people how and when justice should be accomplished.

Much like the complaint of the religious authority figure in our Gospel from Luke today: "There are six days on which work ought to be done," he admonishes the crowd in the synagogue, "come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." You see, Jesus' healing of the bent-over woman does not conform to the prescribed parameters; according to the religious establishment, the timeline for Sabbath observance is inviolable, even in extenuating circumstances. And after all, if the woman has suffered for eighteen years already, surely she can endure one more day.

The leader of the synagogue might as well have said, *I recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized. But I am convinced that this healing is unwise and untimely.* Of course, it's easy to counsel someone else to be patient.²

But, the story in today's Gospel is about much more than an individual healing. It's about the purpose of Sabbath in the first place, and God's purpose in general. Sabbath observance is rooted in the memory of the people's liberation: "Remember that you were [enslaved] in the land of Egypt," Moses proclaims to the Israelites in Deuteronomy, "and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day."³ So, Jesus' healing honors the spirit of the law, even as his timing violates the letter. By lifting up the bent-over woman, he accomplishes God's will to free the captive, while simultaneously laying bare the cruelty of reinforcing barriers for the sake of barriers:

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? [Likewise] 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?

In similar fashion, Martin Luther King rejects the arguments of his detractors, responding to them in his "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," one of the most important American Christian documents of the 20th century:

Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was "well-timed," according to the timetable of those who have not suffered

² Ronald P. Byars, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 3, 385.

³ 5:15.

unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “Wait!” It rings in the ear of every [Black citizen] with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” ...[But] “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” ...There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and [people] are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the blackness of corresponding despair.⁴

Friends, now is the time to make things right. God’s will is for freedom and fullness of life now, and that’s as true today as it was at the time of Moses, at the time of Jesus, on Landing Day, and on the day of Pastor King’s arrest. When we resist change for the sake of God’s reign, we delay, but we cannot finally deny, its fulfillment; that reign is sure to come on Earth as in heaven, with or without our participation. So, let us pray that God grant us the faith and fortitude to join in God’s work of liberation for the sake of all who are still captive, indeed, for the sake of the world God so loves.

⁴ *A Testament of Hope*, 292-3.