

Pentecost 14C (8/21/2016)

Isaiah 58:9b-14

Psalm 103:1-8

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

“Good order” is good as long as it’s good for people. The established order becomes a barrier to the reign of God as soon as it prevents the afflicted from achieving freedom from their afflictions. But even in the face of crippling opposition, Jesus lifts up those who are bent over, fulfilling God’s purpose for healing and abundant life.

“Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever.” This declaration rings out across the decades from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s 1963 “Letter from Birmingham City Jail.”¹ Reverend King was arrested for his role in nonviolent protests in Birmingham, Alabama, and, not unlike the Apostle Paul, he made good use of his incarceration, producing one of the most significant Christian statements of the 20th century. He wrote his letter in response to a censure from fellow clergymen in Alabama who claimed that public demonstration for the sake of civil rights was “unwise and untimely,” and that King and other proponents of racial and economic justice ought to abandon the strategy of direct action in favor of “negotiation.” Instead of challenging systemic racism outright, in other words, they insisted that King pursue justice *with patience* and *from within the system*, so to speak.

Does that sound familiar? “There are six days on which work ought to be done,” the leader of the synagogue scolds the crowd in our Gospel from Luke

¹ *A Testament of Hope*, 297.

today, “come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” By lifting up the bent-over woman – by healing her on the Sabbath – Jesus has violated a longstanding rule: “Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a sabbath of solemn rest, holy to the LORD....” It’s right there in Exodus 31:15, plain as day. *God said it; I read it; that settles it.* (Of course, we don’t adhere to the last part of that verse: “Whoever does any work on the sabbath day shall be put to death.” After all, we can’t go around stoning our neighbors who attend to their animals on Saturday, can we?) The point is that the rule is cut and dried. God has commanded us to observe the Sabbath, period. So, ailing people, regardless of how long they’ve suffered, should wait – they should pursue healing *with patience* and *from within the system*, so to speak.

Rules are good. God has built Sabbath rest into the order of things to sustain God’s beloved creation, and to remind us creatures that the world will not stop turning if we take a day off. The problem arises when our enforcement of the rule undermines its purpose. “Six days you shall labor and do all your work,” we hear again in Deuteronomy.

But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work – you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. *Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, 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.*²

² Deuteronomy 5:13-15. Italics mine.

The context of God's Sabbath command, in other words, is freedom from bondage, and **Sabbath rest is inextricable from God's purpose to liberate the oppressed.** The bent-over woman who shows up in the synagogue that Sabbath day is certainly oppressed, afflicted by a "spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years." So, while the letter of the law would delay her healing until the next day at the earliest, the spirit of the law demands that Jesus grant her freedom immediately. **He upholds the true meaning of Sabbath, fulfilling God's promise to free those who are enslaved, while simultaneously laying bare the cruelty of order for the sake of order.**

Dear church, **"good order" is good as long as it's good for people.** But the established order becomes a barrier to the reign of God as soon as it prevents the afflicted from achieving freedom from their afflictions. **God's liberating work is urgent and immediate, yet it is regularly stymied by those whose sense of security rests on the preservation of the status quo.** This is the case for first-century synagogue officials who fail to grasp the carelessness of enforcing the Sabbath command at the expense of a suffering woman. And, it's the case for 20th-century Christian clergy who fail to grasp the carelessness of demanding that the movement for civil rights conform to a strategy and timetable that is acceptable to them.

In response to his white colleagues, Reverend King gives voice to the plight of millions of bent-over women and men in his time:

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. 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 unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the words “Wait!” ... This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” ... We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. ... I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, “Wait.” But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; ... when you are... plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of “nobodiness”; then you will understand why it is difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of injustice where they experience the blackness of corresponding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.³

“Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever.” In Jesus we witness God’s reign come near today, a new order that breaks old chains. In Jesus we witness God’s promise of abundant life brought to fruition today. Even in the face of crippling opposition, in Jesus we witness God’s will that those who are bent over be lifted up today. And, this is no cheap grace that accommodates our indifference, but a rousing grace that invites us today into the world as God intends it, a world where none of us is bent over, but all of us are free to stand tall.

³ *A Testament of Hope*, 292-3.