

**Proper 16C – What Better Time to Heal?**

Luke 13: 10-17 – 8/22/10 St. John's, Salisbury

The Rev. Canon Lance Beizer

“There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.”

I've titled this homily “What Better Time to Heal?” because of that statement by the leader of the synagogue in which the woman was healed of her 18-year-long affliction, which crippled her and prevented her from standing up straight – as appropriate for this “daughter of Abraham.” The synagogue's leader clearly has a pretty rigid view of what ought to be permitted on the Sabbath, especially, apparently, in his synagogue.

I've been intrigued by the Jewish rules against working on the Sabbath ever since I was in college. I recall having a conversation then with a Jewish student about the issue of Sabbath work. His parents were particularly observant, and lived, as I recall, in Baltimore. His father owned some kind of factory – I don't remember what kind. Anyway, my friend revealed to me that his father dealt with the prohibition in his religion against working on the Sabbath by selling his company to his vice-president, who was not Jewish, every Friday afternoon, and then buying it back Monday morning. That way, whatever work was performed on Saturday he wasn't involved in. In all candor, I don't know what he may have done with whatever profits were generated by the work that was done on all those Sabbaths. Still, it was, I thought, a clever way of handling the problem. Of course, it did require an utterly trustworthy vice-president, didn't it? One who wouldn't refuse to sell the business back, come Monday.

But getting to the question of work: Why has that question been so significant to me? I'm not, after all, Jewish. Although my father's parents *were* Jewish, neither he nor I have ever been. In fact, it really has more to do with Christianity than with Judaism. Here's why: One of the central texts of our religion – one particularly important since the Protestant Reformation – is found in the letter to the Ephesians, which famously observes:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God – not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

If we think of salvation in the way it's generally presented to us in our American world of today, it's the difference between spending an eternity in heaven or hell. So, under that way of looking at things, those folks who have a problem believing what we have been told we must believe – that is, having faith that a particular take on

the meaning of the events of our religion's story is truth with a very big "T" – those folks would, under this formulation, be consigned to the nether world.

What, however, does whether or not they believe in a particular understanding of our religion have to do with working on the Sabbath? Well, to be sure, that letter to the Ephesians tells us that salvation comes through faith, not through works, but what if those preachers who have been telling us that we have to believe exactly as they do are right, and we simply don't? Surely, if we desire strongly enough to be among the elect, we'll put all our efforts towards believing what they, and now we, deem necessary. I sure think of that as work. Also, we are told in this quotation from Ephesians that God has provided us good works to accomplish, even if doing them has nothing to do with our salvation. We are to do good works, the sort of things described in chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel, like feeding the hungry, simply because it's good to do them. Should we not do them because it may be the Sabbath? That surely is what Jesus was doing in the synagogue that Sabbath day that this morning's gospel reading tells us about, wasn't it? What can possibly have been wrong with that? We might even benefit from exploring another question. Was what Jesus did actually work in any case?

Let's think for a moment about what constitutes work. If we use the commonsense notion of what work actually is, aren't I in fact breaking the Sabbath rules as I stand here before you today? Well, O.K., it's not actually the Sabbath today. That was yesterday. This is the Lord's Day. But the idea of Sabbath rest could surely apply to any day that we honor God by resting, as the Bible says God did after completing creation. And, if I were a rabbi instead of a Christian minister, or if my church were Seventh-day Adventist instead of Episcopal, I would indeed be preaching on the Sabbath itself. Wouldn't that be work? Even what we do in church together is a form of work, isn't it? That, after all, is the origin of the word for what we do, "liturgy." It comes from the Greek words that mean "public work." It's all very confusing.

So I looked up the kind of work that observant Jews, including, presumably, the synagogue leaders referred to in today's gospel, would deem forbidden. As one source puts it, work in that setting is different from the meaning we would generally assign to the word. There are 39 kinds of acts that are forbidden. They can all be seen as productive of creation and growth – business sorts of activities, at least in their pure form – such as growing, harvesting, and building or extinguishing a fire. In essence, what is forbidden is activity that bears some relationship to the kind of work God performed in creating the universe. God rested; so should humans. Preaching is not one of those activities, although, judging by what is on the list, undoubtedly writing a sermon would be one of the forbidden activities, since writing more than one letter of the alphabet is one of the 39 proscribed acts. Writing is proscribed, I gather, because it is needed to keep business records, and business of any kind is forbidden. I'm afraid that this Gentile mind gets vertigo trying to comprehend what would be right and what wrong, but I do understand the motivation for the rules themselves.

Interestingly, one of the exceptions that overlays any application of the Sabbath rules is that any of them may, indeed must, be broken if a human life is at stake. And that would have been true even in the society of Jesus and the leader of that synagogue. Now admittedly the woman in today's gospel wasn't in danger of dying. She has, however, been suffering from some sort of crippling condition for 18 long years. The leader insists, upon seeing her cure, that she has had six other days of the week she could have come seeking a cure. She didn't have to do it on the Sabbath. But, then, she didn't come seeking out someone to cure her particular affliction. She presumably came to worship God, despite her condition, just as we all do, and thereby to become a generally healthier person, just as we all do. Furthermore, what did Jesus actually do to effect a cure for this woman – who was, as Jesus reminds them, a “daughter of Abraham”? Did he lay her down on a table, get out a scalpel and call for a scrub nurse? Of course not. What he did was to call the woman over, tell her that she was set free from her affliction and lay his hand on her. That's it. There isn't even a suggestion that he intended to do anything by laying his hand on her beyond showing her compassion. But his word and touch were enough. She could now stand straight.

So, let's ask the question that bugs me: Was there any more work in this act of kindness than there was in the teaching that Jesus was doing at the beginning of the story? I think, frankly, that one could make a strong argument that Jesus did literally no work at all, by whatever definition, since it really was God the Father who healed the woman. Jesus merely proclaimed her cured. Which leads to the question with which I titled this homily. This long-suffering lady was healed on the Sabbath – in a house of worship. How could there possibly be a better time or place? Don't we all, in some sense, come to church for that? For the healing that, at some level, we all need? I ask again, then, the question I started with. What better time to heal?  
AMEN