

Please be seated. Good evening/morning St. Timothy's

The gospel lesson we just heard has many familiar elements: Jesus is teaching, and a person appears needing healing. He cures her, she thanks God for being healed... and there's a problem.

It's classic. Across our scriptures there are stories where people have a need. God responds. And the complaining begins. God's response... did not meet expectations.

I mean, we say thank you... but.

Thank you for the healing, the deliverance, the food, but couldn't you have done it sooner? With something other than manna? Using people other than THEM, God? In a way that doesn't complicate my already-established rules and routines? Rules and routines about... about you?

The local authorities don't like it, because Jesus cured on the Sabbath, and they have rules about that.

Now, it's easy to get bogged-down with trying to understand expectations surrounding the observance of the Sabbath, but the early Jewish people set out to comply, establishing lists about what you can and can't do as both honoring, and as observing. (this is a two-part commandment, the only one that establishes an action.) There are all kinds of forbidden activities, from things like lighting fires and using tools. But to get lost in the minutiae of what is or isn't allowed is to miss the point. The point is – God said – we need the Sabbath. We need a full day each week to rest. To return to God. It's not only about the rules, but just as importantly, about the rituals and prayers followed in the observation of the Sabbath. The words and elements therein remind the faithful to be grateful for sweet spices, for the fruit of the vine, and for the restoration of God's hold on our lives. It's just one day – from the appearance of the first three stars on Friday at dusk, to their reappearing on Saturday evening.

The reward for holding this time, is the blessing of time. Of remembering. Reconnecting with stillness, slowing down, and rest; where God can reside and holds us steady.

Now, this is not a dated or obsolete practice. You need only to go to your local bookseller and wander the “self help” and “modern memoir” sections to see that the concept still holds. All you need to do, is stop. Observe. Lean in. Blink. Move cheese. De-clutter. Eat. Pray. Love. Write. Color. Have a cup, or more, of tea. Go on a long hike. These books proclaim that by faithfully doing these things, you will have the life you desire. These modern practices reflect this ancient truth – this need to create a space where we can know our deepest selves, and what God would have us do. They encourage us to make choices that free us from the clutches of our addictions, our busyness, our grief and over-functioning. These contemporary Sabbath-weavers teach that to make this dis-connection, we need to find a way - - to get out of the way. To slow down and make room for God's claim on our lives.

It seems stunning that anyone would care what day it was, when this woman was cured of the crippling spirit that had her in its clutches for 18 years. And maybe the temple leaders were not wrong in wanting Jesus to toe the line. But maybe, if they had spent as much time teaching about why to observe Sabbath – for restoration, healing and rededication – instead of only harping about how to observe the Sabbath rules, maybe the people themselves could have learned to desire the gift of the Sabbath, and come upon a Sabbath healing, with God's help, without needing to break the law.

Here in the Episcopal church, we also have our moments. We have our rules. Our best practices. We observe rituals because we have come to experience the joy and peace of the accompanying grace. But sometimes, just sometimes, someone will come forward for communion who is not baptized. Or someone will ask for God's

blessing and inclusion, when we are not quite ready to grant ours. And like the elders in today's gospel, we find ourselves getting more than a little anxious about any challenge to our rules.

I am so pleased that our 9:00 bulletin instructs visitors that if they feel called to the table at communion, to come. It goes on to explain that baptism is the path to the table, and that we would welcome a conversation following the service if baptism is something they would like to know more about. But the table is not ours, it's God's. The invitation is not ours, it's God's.

What is ours is the opportunity to trust God. To hold-steady in the force of spirits who may have had these strangers in their clutches, maybe even for 18 years. Give them the bread of life. The water that will quench all thirst. And believe that, with God's help, they can work out the details.

And much like in today's gospel, there's a big stink about this whole affair going on right now among the leadership in the Episcopal church. What should we do about our rule that you must be baptized before receiving communion? When anyone in need of God's healing comes forward, even in these modern times... it seems obvious. But it's not. And, we really don't want to be accused of being hypocrites like in the story today. And so the complaining has begun.

Bless our hearts.

Observing the Sabbath helps us carve out space to listen carefully, with a great love for God, for this church, and one another. Coming here, praying with each other. Praying for each other. Praying for the needs in the hearts of others, known only to God. Being prayed for. This has the capacity to calm our anxious spirits. Observing Sabbath takes us out of our expectations and timelines for God's working for US. and reminds us that we are the ones who should be building God's life in the world. It's God's timeline, but it's our job to be present. Trust God. To observe and honor the rules we have made, but not to be impeded by them. And maybe complain a little.

The ritual observance of Sabbath concludes with an evening prayer, thanking God for establishing the day of rest, and for the separation of what is secular, from what is sacred - not to keep them distinct from one another as much as to keep them in service to one another.

So come. Remember the delights of keeping Sabbath. light a candle. Breathe-in the spice and sweetness of the amazing world God has given us to care for. Look to the heavens and count the stars. Feast and give God thanks. Make Sabbath. Listen. Be healed. Heal each other. Let's pray.

God, our lives are in your hands, and for that we give you thanks. Amen.

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