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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
8/22/2010, the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Isaiah 58:9b-14, Luke 13:10-17  
A Practical Point of the Sabbath

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>13</sup>And [Jesus] laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight, and she praised God. (Luke 13:13, RSV)

I bet she did indeed praise God! Eighteen years doubled over is a mighty long stretch of time. I bet she did indeed praise God when suddenly she was made straight.

There seems to have been something wrong with her back, some curvature of her spine that tilted her head downwards. If you or I are feeling a bit blue, we know that sometimes it can help simply to lift up our heads to see the sun shining and yon horizon. It rather enlarges the perspective and helps lift the spirits. But this poor woman could not do that. She could not lift her head and regard the big sky or the shining sun, but was condemned to walk with her head down, as if lost in thought, or brooding, or carrying the weight of the whole world on her shoulders. Her bent back put her perpetually in the stance of a slave bowed before a cruel master, fearful to look in his face. It structured her to walk along as does a yoked ox, starring down at the ground as it slips by.

And what a toll that that bending of her spine must have placed on the rest of her body! Some internal organs must have been compressed, some ligaments stretched and worn out from trying to support an unnatural distribution of weight, some joints sore from stress.

Besides all that, her sad curvature made her a spectacle. Some people looked upon her with pity and kindness, no doubt. Such compassion is surely better than simply averting the eyes from an uncomfortable sight. But better than a look of pity would it be to be walking straight and tall, looking at people in the eye, looking like other folks do.

I have no idea how old this woman was except that she was at least eighteen. Maybe her whole life had been bent over like this. Maybe it was an affliction of her old age. However that might be, I bet that when Jesus straightened her, he gave her a happy heart to go along with her straight back. If she had known the hymn back then, I bet she would have been glad to sing it, to sing to her children or her grandchildren at her knee:

*I Love to Tell the Story (LBW 390)*

I love to tell the story  
of unseen things above,

of Jesus and his glory,  
of Jesus and his love.  
I love to tell the story,  
because I know it's true;  
it satisfies my longings  
as nothing else would do.

*Refrain*

I love to tell the story;  
I'll sing this theme in glory  
and tell the old, old story  
of Jesus and his love.

Text: Katherine Hankey, 1834-1911

Now, our Lord's miracle of straightening the back of this poor woman took place on the Sabbath day. For us Lutherans, I do not think this should be much of a puzzle. The ruler of the synagogue in our Gospel Lesson objected that the Sabbath day should be reserved as a day free of work. He was indignant about the miracle and declared:

“There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be healed, and not on the sabbath day.” (Luke 13:14, RSV)

And certainly we have to respect his conviction. He is right that in its most ancient meaning, the sabbath day is meant to be a day in which we desist from labor. Our Lord asks us to rest on the sabbath day, for that is what he himself did:

<sup>2</sup>And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made.  
(Genesis 2:2, KJV)

After working full tilt for seven days a week, perhaps a generation of fanatical workers will come to understand that it really would be better to obey the Lord on this matter. Our Maker knows what is best of us. He knows our frame. He knows that we can become weary overmuch. It is a gracious commandment to rest on the sabbath, and if we disobey, we might find it to our own disadvantage. Get some rest. Take a break from your labors. Honor the sabbath day.

But a distinctive Lutheran teaching is that the heart of the Third Commandment is that we should take time, in a busy week, to hear and to receive the Word of God. As far as Luther is concerned, we could rest all day long on Sunday, yet if we do not come to church, we will have failed to honor the sabbath day.

Luther is concerned here, as he is for all of the commandments, for love. Luther follows our Lord Jesus is calling us to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. And so, when it comes to the Third Commandment about honoring the sabbath day, Luther seems to reason along lines like these: How can we say we love the Lord, or love anyone, if we do not take time to listen to what he has to say to us? So, use the sabbath day to listen, with a good heart, to what your Maker has to say to you for the coming week.

Here is how Luther puts it in his Small Catechism:

The Third Commandment  
“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”

*What does this mean?*

Answer: We should fear and love God, and so we should not despise his Word and the preaching of the same, but deem it holy and gladly hear and learn it.

That is the great thing about church. What happens here is not a performance, as in a theatre or concert hall, but something more important, more holy: our Maker speaking to us. We might be “earthen vessels,” to use St. Paul’s phrase (2 Corinthians 4:7), but in Church, our Maker uses our hymns, our Bible readings, my poor words in this sermon, and the Blessed Sacrament to speak his words of love to us. It is part of love’s rhythm: at least once a week, we pause to hear the Word of God and to take it into our hearts.

So, let’s review where we are. Jesus heals a woman who has been bent over for eighteen years. The ruler of the synagogue protests about this, arguing that there should be no healing on the sabbath day. But Jesus is not troubled by this protest, nor is Luther. Why?

Now we come to the next step in this sermon. It seems to me that Jesus is not troubled by the protest about the sabbath because the chief thing about the sabbath is the Word of God, and the chief about the Word of God, in turn, is that we should be better people in this world. To use some of the language from this morning’s reading from Isaiah, the people of God should...

...pour yourself out for the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted  
(Isaiah 58:10, RSV)

Jesus had been teaching in the synagogue that day. But what is the point of teaching holy things if the teaching does not lead to some good deeds in this world? So, Jesus turns immediately from his teaching to a good deed: he heals the poor bent over woman. In this way, he gives us a vision of the proper sabbath sequence: We hear the Word of God, which encourages us and guides us, and

then, in the power of what we have heard, in the power of the Spirit, we turn to helping our neighbors.

Luther expresses this fundamental teaching in terms of the goal of our Lord's sacrifice for us. Why did Jesus do it? Why was he born as a human being, why did he accept the cross, why did he rise from the dead, and why did he beckon to you in baptism to come and follow him? What is the practical point of all our Lord's labors on our behalf? It is that we should become better people. Luther puts it this way:

*What does the Second Article of the Creed mean?*

Answer: I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord, who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, delivered me and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with silver and gold but with his holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death, *in order that I may be his, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness*, even as he is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.

It was the teaching of Jesus long ago that his followers should make the world a better place to live in:

<sup>14</sup>You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. <sup>15</sup>Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup>Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16, RSV)

These are words we are proud to repeat every time we do a baptism here at Immanuel: "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine..."

Let me tell you about the farewell sermon of my friend Rev. William Snyder. He was longtime assistant pastor and then associate pastor to Rev. Leonard Klein down at Christ Lutheran Church in York, PA. Some of you will remember Leonard because he served here at Immanuel when he was a young pastor.

Bill Snyder is one of my very best friends. Carol's too. We have known and loved him and his wife Patty since the earliest days of our ministry. In fact, if I want pastoral advice, I am most likely to turn to him.

In Bill's last sermon there at Christ Lutheran Church, he spoke of that congregation's social ministry. He was the leader of that ministry and cared about it deeply. He cared about such things as our congregation's Meals on Heels program, for example. In fact, the reason he was leaving Christ Lutheran Church was to devote himself fulltime to social ministry, which he has done as an

executive for Lutheran Social Services and now for a network of social service agencies called Luthercare.

Christ Lutheran Church in York, PA was a large congregation with a rich social ministry program. But in his farewell sermon, Bill did not speak of the congregation's programs, but rather of its people. His great line went something like this: "You dear people of this congregation, each of you, one by one, are the most important social ministry this congregation has. Your Christian life out in the community is the most important thing we do."

And that is the truth, not only at Christ Lutheran Church, York, PA, but here at Immanuel, and in every congregation. A church should be flooding the city with people who are trying to do some good in this world. A church should be a fountain of water that refreshes the city, a kind of holy volcano releasing people into the world who are ablaze for God and ablaze for the neighbor.

That is why it is good that you are here on this sabbath day. It gives our city some reason for hope.

Let me close by lifting up the individual attention Jesus gave to the bent-over woman:

<sup>12</sup>And when Jesus saw her, *he called her* and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your infirmity."

There were many people in that synagogue. On that particular Sabbath, Jesus called out to one and laid his hands on one, this woman who had been bent over for eighteen years. Now, he calls out to *one of us* again, each of us, one at a time. His call and his benefit to you are every bit as important as the blessing he gave that woman so long ago. Indeed, his words and his touch mean everything! For he gives us his body and his blood for the forgiveness of sins, which means every good thing, including resurrection of the body and life everlasting in his kingdom, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.