Just Water the Donkeys

A Meditation On Luke 13: 10 – 17

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church August 25, 2019

Did you know that in Nevada it’s illegal to drive a camel on the highway? Or that in Alaska, it is illegal to wake a sleeping bear and take a picture of it? (They need a law against that? Shouldn’t it be obvious?) In Alabama it’s illegal to wear a fake mustache that might cause laughter in church! Will someone please promise to wear a fake mustache next Sunday? In West Virginia you aren’t allowed to whistle underwater… is that even possible? Now here’s a law that would have saved me years of embarrassment: in Nebraska a mother is not allowed to give her daughter a perm unless she has a hairdresser’s license! What a great idea.

There must be a pretty fabulous story behind each of these laws. You know someone was chased down by a really cranky bear. Or some pastor with much more political clout than I have got upset because a congregant with a fake mustache made someone laugh during the sermon. Every state has some hilarious law on its books…and quite a few have to do with bears. Although there are plenty of other animals to choose from. Don’t wear a duck on your head while crossing a state line or put a donkey in the bathtub. What stories prompted these laws?[[1]](#endnote-1)

Unlike these crazy laws, the rules that guided the Sabbath weren’t foolish or funny. Still, the Sabbath law, the mandate to rest, was *also* born from a story. It was born from the story of creation. God labored to bring the world into existence, and on the seventh day, God rested. So, too, the Jewish people labored six days of the week, and rested on the seventh. Added to the story of creation, was the story of the Hebrews’ enslavement in Egypt, a time when they could not rest, the story of being worked to death. To reclaim Sabbath was to proclaim freedom. Freedom from Pharaoh, freedom to honor their faith and its sacred traditions. Is it any wonder that the religious leaders guarded the Sabbath? It defined God’s people just as telling someone where you go to church today says something about how you live out your faith.

Sabbath: a day for rest and for worship. But even on the seventh day there were things that must be done; humane, compassionate actions. The chickens need grain. The oxen need straw. The donkeys must be watered. These actions do not have to be justified or explained. If you own an animal, you care for it seven days a week. This is basic common sense. It is the compassionate and responsible way to live.

And so, Jesus turns to those who complain about the way he lives out the Sabbath, and says, “Do you ever untie your ox or donkey, bring it out of the stall and offer it water on the Sabbath?” Of course you do! If you would untie your animals and lead them to water so that they may live to work for you another day, how could it be wrong for the son of man to unbind a woman from her brokenness and lead her into new life on the Sabbath? This way of reasoning was known to the religious leaders, it was a model of argument called “from the lighter to the greater.” [[2]](#endnote-2)They could see the logic of caring for their animals, so he reminded them of the truth behind those actions. He led them the truth of caring for their beasts, to the truth of caring for all of God’s creation.

But she was not only a woman, but a woman with a disability. And she had been this way for 18 years. She was invisible. They could see the necessity of caring for their animals, but healing a woman could wait another day. No rush. No urgency.

From their positions of privilege the Sabbath rules made sense to the religious leaders. But if that bent over woman had been their sister, or mother or daughter would they have wanted Jesus to wait another day? Would they have wanted him to wait even an hour before healing her? What difference would one day make? All the difference to the one in pain. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King said, “The time is always right to do what is right.” Why do we make it so complicated?

This is what Sabbath rest looks like: it is the life-giving and freedom-bringing work of God.

Maybe God did rest on that first Sabbath, but I can’t believe God has had time to rest since then. I would imagine that God’s weekends are pretty jam packed: beginning with those who gather in synagogues and temples to the myriad of church services that take place on Saturdays and Sundays. On those days, all of us bent over people gather together to sing and pray and serve, and God is in our midst both to heal us and to wake us from our hypocrisy. It’s a pretty big job.

God is in our midst to bring us healing. Don’t look away from this woman’s affliction. That she is bent over is deeply symbolic. Her posture is not unlike the animals Jesus compares her to, the ox and the donkey. She has become less than human in the eyes of the community. Her affliction has “bound” her; she cannot move with freedom.

This feeling, of being weighed down so heavily that we feel as if we are bent over, it is universal. Everyone has known it at some point. For some it is the weight of grief that both cripples and binds. Grief has the power to define and color everything. Grief can isolate. For others it is shame that bends them down. Shame or guilt. Again, a universal experience. Everyone walks into this space with regrets. Everyone walks in with things they wish they had not said, with things they wish they could undo. With thoughts and emotions they should not have fed.

Still others are weighed down from physical, mental and emotional illnesses. Addictions can cripple. PTSD can last a lifetime. Some are bent over by misshapen theology that taught them they would never be good enough in God’s eyes. We come here, bent over in our own ways. In this space I hope you will find a soft place where you don’t have to pretend that everything is okay. While none of us can be a single source of healing to each other – we need doctors and nurses, therapists and support groups –we can create a space that it not-judgmental. We can create a space that allows people to be real. A place where it is okay to acknowledge addictions and phobias and grief and mistakes without being judged. Do we offer shame or grace? If we, as God’s people, do not know how to be kinder than necessary, we have a problem.

And Jesus will put a name on that problem in case we don’t know what it is. He will roll out that word he used last Sunday: hypocrite! It has a hard sound, doesn’t it? It’s not a word that is pleasing to the ear: hypocrite. It is a one word definition of what the church cannot afford to be. Even in our brokenness. Let us hope that when we fail it is because we have tried to extend too much mercy, rather than too little. Let us hope that when we err it is on the side of watering too many donkeys, instead of too few.

Hypocrite. This is the word of caution that should be before us when we make our decisions. When we miss the obvious and most basic means of carrying out God’s work in the world, we are hypocrites. We cannot water our donkeys (which while being compassionate, is also self-serving, since a donkey is an investment) while we ignore the suffering and oppressed all around us.

And let us remember, she did not come asking for healing. She came to worship. Jesus saw her in her vulnerability and went to her to offer her restoration. Other than his first appearance in the synagogue, his subsequent visits always linked teaching with healing. Word *and* action. Every time. We know this truth. We aren’t Jesus, and sometimes the only gift we can offer someone is to listen to their pain. That listening is vital and holy work. Allowing someone to hear your story is vital and holy work.

The woman was not the only person in this story who was bent over, weighed down. Her affliction was visible, recognizable. What about the synagogue leader? Wasn’t he bound, too? Wasn’t he also in need of freedom? What about the burden of upholding all those rules, of living up to all those expectations. No one could see it from looking at him, but he was bent over, too. In his desire to honor God, he had forgotten how to love people.

Forgive me, but I must quote one of my favorite musicals, *Les Misérables*,
“to love another person is to see the face of God.” The synagogue leader missed God’s face twice that day. He missed God’s face when he looked upon Jesus, but maybe even more importantly he missed God’s face when he looked upon that bent down woman. We embody our love for God by loving one another. Strangers, friends, family.

Jesus called this woman, this nobody, a “daughter of Abraham,” decisively placing her in the honor roll of the family of God. He did this for little Zacchaeus, too. He called Zacchaeus a “son of Abraham.” They had something in common: both were looked down upon. Neither could look people in the eye. The woman was bent too low to see others, and Zacchaeus, was considered a traitor for being a Jew who collected taxes for the Romans. Jesus saw more in them. He saw their desire to belong to their community. He opened a door for them which they could not open for themselves. Jesus comes offering healing for those who need it. Sometimes our brokenness is a life of hypocrisy. Jesus can heal that, too.

In the Greek, “hypocrite” is another term for “actor.” Let us be careful about how we follow Jesus. We want to be the “real deal,” not simply actors playing a part. Let’s get out there and water some donkeys. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/weird-laws-in-america\_n\_56a264abe4b0d8cc1099e1cd [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Connections, Year C. Elizabeth F. Caldwell. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)