Not too long ago, I came across an internet survey which tested the reader’s knowledge about religious literacy. One of the questions asked if the reader could name the Ten Commandments.

Now granted, I don’t spend a whole lot of my time preaching about our sin. Nor do I dig into the Old Testament all that often. Nonetheless, I am a bit embarrassed to say that I only got eight out of the ten. I left out was the one about honoring the Sabbath. Maybe it was because I work on Sundays. It was surprising, too, when, as many of you may remember, our old dog was named Shabbat!

In the great religious tradition that shaped and nurtured Jesus, keeping the Sabbath was one of the most important spiritual practices. The idea of resting on the seventh day of the week goes all the way back to the first pages of the Scriptures. After God completed the work of bringing the world into being, the legend tells us that God took the next day off. “God blessed the seventh day,” the writer of Genesis wrote, “and made it holy.” [Genesis 2:2-3]

Over time, the Jewish people had developed some very precise rules and expectations that addressed what you could and what you could not do on the Sabbath. For example, it was okay to mix some ingredients for your supper, but if you put in the wrong ingredient, let’s say chili power instead of cinnamon – which I can tell you from experience ruins French toast – well, you were forbidden from removing it.

Jesus, being a faithful Jew knew the importance of the Sabbath and he would have kept it holy as an essential spiritual practice in his life.

But as we turn to our Gospel story this morning, we find that Jesus is in a bit of trouble because the thing he did happened on the Sabbath. This was not the first time he upset the rules officials by healing someone on the Sabbath. In this story, he healed this woman of her ailment but he does so at the most inopportune moment. As a result, he was at odds with his faith’s tradition.

This is the last time we read [in Luke’s gospel] about Jesus being in a synagogue. Luke has already told us that the religious authorities were watching him very closely. [Luke 11:53]

They were always on the lookout for anything that might upset the Romans, which in turn could cause great hardship to the Jews. When a new rabbi came to town, or a small rebellion began to fester, the Chief Priest and his cohorts were vigilant. They would move quickly to try to suppress anything or anyone who might bring about trouble. So they followed Jesus, listened closely to what he said, and from time-to-time challenged his authority to teach. They wanted to know if this new teacher was a prophet or a pretender.

So here was Jesus speaking to the faithful in a synagogue when he noticed a woman in the far corner of the room who had a disabiling medical condition. He stopped what he was doing and reached out to her, and said, “You are set free from your ailment.” Immediately, Luke tells us, “She stood up straight and began praising God.” [Luke 13:12-13]

Well, this did not sit well with the leader of the synagogue. “This is the Sabbath,” he cried out, and one was not supposed to do any work on that holy day. And according to the Jewish Law, healing an infirmed woman, even if it took place
while the faithful were gathered for worship, was still labeled work. And so the leader of the synagogue let him have it.

As I was kicking around a couple of ideas of how to help us hear this story, I started thinking of an old cliche, or an old adage, handed down from generation. William Safire, in his old column “On Language” in the New York Times Magazine once wrote that the word “adage” came from the Latin, and means, “old sayings.” These are old sayings one writer called “everyday theology.”

So what was the old adage in this story? We’ve never done it that way before.

That was true. For generations – for centuries – the Jews had honored the Sabbath.

Change doesn’t come easy for religious folks. You know how many Presbyterians it takes to change a light bulb, don’t you? “Change! Who said anything about change? My grandmother gave that light bulb!”

But there Jesus was, doing something that violated that time-honored truth and that overturned a tradition-honoring practice. But before we get carried away with judging the synagogue leader, we ought to show a bit of understanding and sympathy toward him. Why? Because what he said was a clear and compelling reading of the law. In other words, he was right: you were not supposed to do any work on the Sabbath.

Keeping Sabbath had been one of the original commands of God, (it is number 4 on the list of the Top 10). [Exodus 20:8-11] It was part of the rich tapestry of Jewish spiritual practice. At its core, the Sabbath reminded the faithful that God was the central element of their lives, not money, not your boss at work, not the competing interest for your time or attention. Sabbath was a day for rest and renewal, a day set aside to honor the Lord. If this practice was good enough for God, the reasoning went, it surely must be for us, too.

But Jesus did not hesitate. He did not let a moment pass before he reached out and helped the woman. And as he did so, it brought to mind another old adage: No good deed goes unpunished.

In this story, Jesus does something very, very good. He helps a woman who has suffered for most of her life. He lifts up her body, and her spirit, and her very life.

Notice what happened in the story. Jesus did not label her “disabled” or “hindered” or in some way count her as a “victim” of life’s unfairness. He has no interest in having her infirmity define her life. Rather, he changed everything for the woman.

Not only does Jesus break the rules of the Sabbath to bring healing to this woman, he breaks another religious barrier by treating her with respect and worthiness – something that did not happen to women in the Jewish world of the 1st century. Jesus gave her a new name and a new identity, and calls her “daughter of Abraham.” The Bible speaks often of the “sons of Abraham” or the “seed of Abraham”, but this is the only place in all the Scripture where someone is called the “daughter of Abraham.”

And what does he get for his good deed? Grief.

But Jesus is interested in something far more important that a rule about the Sabbath. Jesus is interested in the rule of love. And that brings to mind another old adage: You can’t see the forest for the trees.

You see, for Jesus, the Sabbath had meaning and value, but keeping the Sabbath paled in light of sharing the love of God with someone, in bringing light to a very dark world, or in bringing hope and life to someone who lived so long without either.

What Jesus seems to be saying is that the rule of the Sabbath shouldn’t supersede the rule of love. In another place in the gospels, Jesus is asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” His answer: Love God with whole heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. [Mark 12:30-31; Matthew 22:37-40] Jesus would say that practicing holiness has great value but it does not trump the love and justice of God; it is not more important than helping your neighbor in need. “If I have not love,” wrote St. Paul in his great passage from 1 Corinthians 13, “If I have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clashing cymbal.”

For Jesus, nothing is more important than helping this woman, not even the practice of Sabbath-keeping. The Sabbath is nothing more than a thick patch of trees keeping us from experiencing the rich bountiful forest of God’s love. God’s love breaks down the barriers and
opens us to new life. The rule of love is greater than all the other rules. God did not bring the world into being in order to impose a rule book. “For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only son” and God did so in order that the world might be saved.” [John 3:16-17]

Jesus did not want this woman to suffer one moment longer than she already had. He doesn’t want us, or our neighbor, or others in our world, to suffer any longer. And so we learn today that God’s love surpasses all things, even our sacred traditions. And as Luke tells us, “the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things Jesus was doing.” [Luke 13:17]

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i “Activities prohibited on Shabbat,” Wikipedia.


iii Aaron Armstrong, Blogging Theologically.


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