

September 4, 2022
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Come Thou Unexpected Jesus: To Dare a Deed

Deuteronomy 5:12-15; Luke 13:10-17

We are in the middle of a series of sermons that will explore some key Biblical moments when Jesus was, quite simply, not who people wanted him to be.

As his ministry began, he was faced with years of tradition, scriptures, teachings and laws which had culminated into a clear messianic expectation. The Israelites were expecting a very certain savior. And yet, as we will explore, Jesus seemed to have little interest in fulfilling that expectation. Jesus' mission did not appear to be one of human appeasement.

In today's passage, we again hear of an incident that occurred in a synagogue - this time in the religious center of Israel: Jerusalem.

Before we begin to explore the happenings of this occurrence — first, some context:

Jesus was traveling, and as he did he was teaching and healing both Israelites and Gentiles (Luke 7). He had brought people back from the dead (Luke 8), he had called his disciples (Luke 5), fed the 5,000 (Luke 9) and was amassing a following. And, on more than one occasion, had been met with challenges to his observance of the Sabbath (Luke 6). In fact, the story today was one of four sabbath controversies starring Jesus in the book of Luke (6:1,-5; 6:6-11; 14:1-6).

The first passage we read today covers the explanation of this Sabbath law found in the Pentateuch, or the Books of Moses. In the Christian Bible, we find it in the Old Testament, chapter five of the book of Deuteronomy. Moses had just “convened all of Israel” (5:1) to present the ten commandments, which were understood to be a holy covenant between the people and God (also found in exodus 31: 12-17).

These verses are bookended by two Hebrew verbs for keep (שמר) and remember (זכר). Between these two verbs of the Sabbath Law lies a carefully formulated structure that:

“emphasizes the seriousness of the law by *extending* it beyond [even] the people themselves...

Keep the Sabbath by making it holy as YHWH has commanded

Six days you shall labor and do all your work

The seventh day is a sabbath to YHWH

You and your household are not to do any work (on the Sabbath)

Remember your past--YHWH commands you to observe the Sabbath”¹

Remember that. We’ll revisit it momentarily — this covenantal call to keep and remember.

So, in our Luke passage, the argument is being made that Jesus was breaking the Sabbath because he engaged in the work of healing.

Now, let me be clear: I truly believe that Sabbath is one of the most beautiful gifts God has given us. A call to rest, a reminder that we are kept, and are no longer enslaved by the consumeristic production-based capitalist notion of value. Because that’s what Sabbath was and is — an

¹ Christensen, *World Biblical Commentary*

invitation to remember that while God's people were once slaves to Egypt, and their value was completely tied to their production, the Sabbath is a reclamation of and a re-defining of that worth. Worth as human. Worth as God's own.

In his book, *Sabbath*, Rabbi Abram Heschel explained that:

When the Sabbath is entering the world, man is touched by a moment of actual redemption; as if for a moment the spirit of the Messiah moved over the face of the earth.²

So, no, I don't believe that Jesus was dismissing the Sabbath. But there is something going on here. As a Rabbi and a good and observant Jew, he would have been expected to keep the letter of this law: and yet, the legalism appears to be what he was bucking.

But he rebels by quoting the law. In both Exodus (23:5) and Deuteronomy (22:4), the Sabbath law is clarified in the case of the care of oxen, sheep, and donkeys... the exception to complete rest is made when an animal is in distress, needing care, or is lost.

In a way, he breaks the law by upholding the law, by assisting a person in distress. A person needing care.

So, that's the backstory. Now, I would like for us to enter into curiosity— what was this moment like for Jesus? How often did his overwhelming love in the face of abject injustice and

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath*

inhumanity threaten to devastate, to flip into righteous rage? How hard was it for Jesus to temper this wrestling with patience? **

This morning, I invite you to enter into an imaginative moment with me, asking what can we learn from his choices?

As Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, a woman for whom every step was agony, walked in. She is only known as the “Bent Woman,” forever defined by the infirmity that plagued her — her humanity, even to this day, seen only through the lens of her disability.

She wasn’t there for a healing — there’s no indication she had an agenda at all — and yet, Jesus stopped teaching, and called out to her. The urgency of the moment was overtly marked by his overwhelming compassion. “Woman you are set free!” (Luke 13:12). I hear this as an almost uncontrolled shout across the temple, past the men around him toward the rear of the synagogue, where the woman worshiped.

Was Jesus’ heart pounding with compassion as he wove his way through the crowd to get to her, to this woman, bent so far over that all she could have seen were his feet? When he lay his hands on her, was that the first time someone touched her without it causing pain? When she was

instantly healed and was finally able to stand up straight, were his eyes the first she had looked into in eighteen years?

I imagine that that moment like it was frozen in time, as they shared the silence of connected awe.

And then.

And then the leader of the synagogue stepped in, his objection a crashing cacophony of short-sighted legalism.

But was the religious leader wrong?

Technically, he wasn't.

According to the letter of the law, in the way he understood that law, Jesus was wrong.

You see, there were expectations for a religious leader to uphold the letter of the religious laws.

Which is why I think it is so masterful for Luke to point out how often Jesus preached in the synagogues.

Sometimes it's tempting to think of Jesus as only a renegade, someone operating outside of this society. But Luke's Gospel puts him squarely in the middle of the religious societal fabric.

And this is why his seeming rebellion against the accepted legalism of the Sabbath law was so shocking.

Then Jesus reacts: “You hypocrites!”

Was that anger?

Would that make us uncomfortable?

We understand that boil.

When anger rises from the pit in our stomachs, the heat on the back of our necks

Jaw set, breath stilted

Barely balancing the tears in the corners of our eyes

Could Jesus have felt that?

“Hypocrites” — a word that lands with the weight of lead at their feet.

But this was not a shallow flippant fury. His reaction was provoked as he was confronted with unapologetic injustice masked as religious piety. This leader of the faith was willing to allow the woman to suffer. And therefore Jesus reacted.

Sometimes we are taught that Jesus was meek and mild, even quiet. And if we hear anything of his anger, it is restricted only to one time when he flipped a table, which is so often explained away as an exception.

But I think the danger of that kind of teaching is that it this can make us afraid our own visceral reactions to injustice.

Because, in reading this moment, I see Jesus' righteous reaction at the suffering of another not as an accidental human moment but as Jesus' divinity on full display.

And there's something else going on here.

Jesus followed his rebuke with an explanation. He explained how this was permissible by utilizing the law itself to make space for this act of compassion. In this moment, Jesus was speaking the language of the leader of the synagogue. This is a bridge opportunity.

In his insistence that there is no final, hardened interpretation of Biblical texts that holds if it is at the expense of, or the exclusion of, or the perpetuating an injustice toward another, he was reaching out to the masters of the law — making a way for them to understand. This is compassion for them as well as for the woman. One healing has occurred, and another is offered.

I hear Jesus calling out the leaders of the temples — charging them to understand more fully, teaching that nothing could separate *anyone* from the love of God: not infirmity, not death, not even stiff-necked religion.

This is love. Shocking and abundant.

And this love is our example.

Jesus did not let injustice go unchecked

He did not regard legalism as paramount

So

We can not let injustice go unchecked

We can not allow legalism to exclude or mask bigotry behind the false veil of religious superiority

Righteous anger has a role: it helps us sense that something is deeply wrong, it compels us to act

But also —

Our authority to act in Jesus' name must come from a place of love.

I think that help our discernment — our ability to distill our human anger from that which is divinely inspired.

Love.

Howard Thurman explained that kind of love as:

The movement of the Spirit of God in the hearts of men and women [which] often calls them to act against the spirit of their times or causes them to anticipate a spirit which is yet in the making. In a moment of dedication they are given wisdom and courage to dare a deed that challenges and to kindle a hope that inspires.³

³ Thurman, *Footprints of a Dream : The Story of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples*

So may we cling to the God who has continued to invade the wall-building religiosities with God's unrelenting love. May we follow the example of the Christ who channeled anger into divine action, who offered bridges of understanding , and who healed with abundant compassion. May we see the world as it could be, as it should be, and may we refuse to assimilate to an ideology that would accept less.

Amen and Amen.