

# Towson Presbyterian Church

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Luke 13: 10-17

*“Decently & In Order”*

The way society treated her, it was clear kingdom life wasn't for her. She had learned that long ago.

It'd been 18 years since she lost the ability to stand up straight. 18 years since she'd grown all hunched over, unable to move without severe pain. 18 years since she'd taught herself to recognize people by the tops of their feet. 18 years since she'd seen the flecks of color in her loved ones' eyes, or the beauty of their smiles amid a hearty bout of laughter. 18 years since society viewed her with the dignity and respect a child of God deserved.

But there she was... slowly... painfully entering the synagogue all hunched over amid the pain and grief her ailment had caused her the past two decades.

When Jesus saw her... he didn't care he was in the middle of teaching a lesson. When he saw her... he didn't stop to ponder what time it was or what day of the week it happened to be. When Jesus saw this woman whose body was broken and whom society regularly dismissed, he immediately called her over to him.

And with the compassion and love of God's kingdom emanating from his very being into hers he said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

Then he reached out and touched this crippled woman, in front of everybody!

And, "Immediately... immediately she stood up and began praising God," because when you encounter the love and compassion of God's kingdom in your very being, what other response is there? When the love and compassion of God's kingdom straightens you up so you can see life as God intends, with all the blessings surrounding you that you couldn't see before... what else is there to do but begin praising God?

And it wasn't just her. The folks in the synagogue started rejoicing, too. I mean... when the broken is made whole... when what's outside finally makes its way in... when a child of God uncovers healing... freedom... justice for the first time in 18 years there is reason to celebrate, right?!

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But the leader of the synagogue... he wasn't in a celebratory mood. Not that day, at least. That day happened to be the Sabbath—a day for refraining from any and all things work related.

Scripture is quite clear about it, actually. The second chapter of Genesis tells us: "And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation."

We read of the Sabbath's importance again in Exodus 20, as the fourth of God's 10 Commandment declares, "Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God..."

This same commandment is repeated in Deuteronomy 5, where it's added that one's slaves and animals are also prohibited from working.

So as tempting as it is to make the synagogue leader out to be a villain here, it's not so black and white. The leader believed it was his job to ensure his Hebrew community followed the Torah to a "T." So if Scripture says rest on this day, he wanted to make sure everyone in his synagogue did as Scripture commanded.

What's more, it's not like the synagogue refused this woman entry. In fact, scholars suggest this synagogue was probably the crippled woman's own community of faith. They'd probably been helping care for her these past 18 years. And the leader, I suspect, would've had a significant hand in that.

So when the leader interrupted the celebration shouting, "Cut it out!" he's not playing the villain. He's saying, "There are six days on which work ought to be done. Come here on any of the other six days and heal as many people as you can, Jesus. Just not on the Sabbath!"

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He had a point... at least from a certain, limited, rule-oriented perspective.

But Jesus had little patience for such a narrow view of God's word, and even less patience for those more focused on the letter of the law than the purpose *behind* it ...

For Scripture is also clear that God gave the law was to the Hebrews not to limit or bind them up, but to help them free... to give them a guide... a way to live life amid all the fullness God had always intended for them.

And to live into the fullness of life God intended for them, God knew the people would need rest—rest from work and labor, time set aside to remember who they are and whose they are, time to simply breathe and be with God in prayer and each other in fellowship. So rather than simply being a strict law everyone had to mindlessly heed, the gift of Sabbath was given to ensure that everyone—men, women, children, and even slaves—could rest and refocus and reset on the freedom and fullness God intended for them.

The synagogue leader... he'd lost sight of that. He actually believed it was more important to do nothing on the Sabbath than to help lead another to freedom for her ailment... or wholeness from her brokenness.

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But Jesus wasn't having it. Not at all. So he laid into the synagogue leaders. I mean, the leader and his team, they got it bad. "You hypocrites!" Jesus yelled. "Doesn't each of give your animals food and drink on the Sabbath so that they may live and be healthy? Then how dare you claim one shouldn't help provide life and health for another person! How can it possibly be against God's will to breathe love and life to someone who needs it... on the day of the Lord, no less?"

Luke writes, “When (Jesus) said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.”

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Clearly, Jesus wasn't about to let religious leaders tie the love and compassion of God's kingdom up in legalese. Nor was he about to let their insistence on doing things the right way stand in the way of his desire to do the right thing.

So he rightfully tore into those religious leaders. Which makes me stop and wonder how Jesus would've torn into me if he'd been standing next to me one of the many times I fell prey to desire to focus on doing something the right way rather than simply making sure the right thing got done.

Admittedly, the Church is often guilty of this. The universal church, certainly, but also us Presbyterians, in particular. We who love to make sure everything is done “decently and in order.” For anyone who doesn't know, Presbyterians are famous—or infamous (depending on whom you ask)—for that phrase. Our tradition has taught us the importance of doing all things “decently and in order.” The phrase itself is pulled directly from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, in which he advises the Corinthian Church to ensure their worship is always offered in a decent and orderly way. So at our core, Presbyterians, we believe in process. We believe in making sure i's get dotted and t's get crossed. Policy and procedure matter.

It's part of the reason our tradition is known for communal discernment... and democratic decision making. There are good, important elements of this, to be sure.

But I gotta be honest. While there's certainly a lot to like about our love of process, Presbyterians, the more time I spend in the Gospel with stories like this one from Luke, the more I believe Jesus wouldn't want the phrase “decently and in order” coming too close to the kingdom of God.

Because the kingdom of God doesn't seem altogether decent or orderly to me at all. The whole point of grace... the whole divine call to love our neighbors as ourselves... the point that sits at the very center of the Sabbath and the law itself is for God's children to be set free from all that prevents us from living into the full, whole life God intends. That's messy business, isn't it? Setting people free! Breaking systemic bonds of injustice. Mending the broken. Putting the last first. Turning society's priorities upside down and inside out.

It's why the gospels reveal a Messiah who seemed intent on confronting the order of his day. The decent thing to do on the Sabbath, according to the synagogue, was nothing. But Jesus didn't give a fig about the synagogue's notion of decency or order if it meant keeping the crippled woman hunched over for one more day. So he threw decency and order out the window and disrupted the order, and sought to bring life and freedom to fullness to a child of God.

That's what kingdom work is all about, right? Sharing a healing grace and inclusive love not just with those able to stand up for themselves, but also and in particular those who've grown hunched over, crippled by forces of this world that have robbed them of the wholeness, and freedom and fullness of life God intends.

It's why grace tears boundaries apart. It's why love calls forth gifts from people who don't know each other. And it's why the justice of God's kingdom looks first not to what you want, but to what your neighbor truly needs.

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Towson Presbyterian Church, we need to remember this truth.

We need to remember this truth as we continue talking about systemic racism and the role of hatred and bigotry in our society right now.

We need to remember this truth as we explore the growing epidemic of gun violence in our nation, our city, our county, and our call to do more about it.

We need to remember this truth as we endeavor to do more to fight global and local poverty and food insecurity.

And I dare say it's why our faith... we need to remember this truth as we wrestle with our response to our nation's immigration debate and struggles right now!

Kingdom work is not as much about decency and order as much as it's about the messy, confounding, sometimes confrontational work of challenging systems and crossing boundaries in pursuit of a justice... a way of life... a peace this world can hardly fathom.

Amen.