

Healing on the Sabbath
August 22, 2010 (Proper 16C)
Luke 13:10-17
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Anybody feel like they're on overload these days? It's not hard to imagine why.

We sleep 2½ hours less per night than people did a hundred years ago. The average office worker has 36 hours of work piled up on his or her desk. We spend eight months of our lives opening junk mail, two years playing phone tag, five years waiting for people who are habitually late for meetings.

Overload comes when we have too much activity in our lives, too many choices, too much work, too much debt, too much information, too many deadlines. More and more we are chronically rushed, chronically late, chronically exhausted. How concerned should we be?

In ancient Athens a man noticed the great storyteller Aesop. He was playing children's games with a group of boys. The man laughed at Aesop, asking him why he was wasting his time in such childish activity. Aesop responded by picking up a bow. He loosened its string and placed it on the ground. Then he challenged the man, "Answer this riddle, if you can: Tell me what the unstrung bow implies." The man looked at it for several minutes but couldn't come up with an answer. Aesop then explained, "If you let the bow go slack from time to time, it will be more fit for use when you need it. But if you always keep the bow bent, it will eventually break."

A woman on overload comes to hear Jesus in the synagogue. I wonder if she's near the breaking point. She's physically bent over and cannot stand up straight. She's been this way for 18 years. When Jesus sees her, he invites her to come closer. That's noteworthy for at least a couple of reasons. One, she's a woman—Jewish men normally didn't address women in public. And two, her illness makes her ritually "unclean"—those who were unclean didn't have a place among God's people. But Jesus, as is so often the case, doesn't let religious scruples get in the way of caring for people. In effect, he creates a place for this overloaded, unwanted woman to belong. "Woman," he says, "you are set free from your ailment." Immediately she's able to stand up straight. And she begins to praise God.

Now, if you're a religious leader and you're keeping score, Jesus already has two strikes against him: he's talking to a woman *and* she's unclean. And here comes the third strike: it's the Sabbath. Healing is considered a work, a violation of the Sabbath's call to rest. The leader of the synagogue is indignant: "Could this not have been done some other day?"

Jesus doesn't pull any punches: "Hypocrite," he calls the man, and also those around him. He uses a play on words to make his point: "Let me get this straight. You are willing to free an ox or a donkey that's bound and give it water on the Sabbath. But you're not willing to free a daughter of Abraham who's been bound for 18 years? What's wrong with this picture?" When Jesus says this, his opponents are put to shame. And the crowd of onlookers starts high-fiving each other.

Now, to be perfectly honest, I'm not sure why Jesus healed this woman on the Sabbath. He could have waited. It's not like he was *against* keeping the Sabbath. Then again, Jesus had a way of putting rules aside in order to respond to human need. The Sabbath was intended to be life giving, he said, but along the way it had been turned into something else—rules piled upon rules. "Enough," Jesus is telling them, "the Sabbath should be what it's intended to be: a day of special blessing for God's people."

Fast forward 2000 years. We still observe the Sabbath. We observe it not on Saturday, but on Sunday. Why? Because Sunday is the day Jesus rose from the dead. Sunday is the day that early Christians gathered for worship and to share a meal together. Sunday is our Sabbath. To observe it, we combine the early Christian practice of worship with the ancient Jewish practice of rest. At least, that's what we try to do.

We have a commandment that spells this out: "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy." Notice this isn't a polite "suggestion." It's a commandment. It's an ethical precept as serious in God's eyes as the prohibitions against lying, stealing, and killing. And like all the commandments, we know it's for our own good.

Many of us can recall a time when farmers quit work on Sunday, stores were closed, and people went to church in the morning and then came home to eat pot roast. But those days are long gone. Now we live in a 24/7 world. Now we have soccer games on Sunday morning and football to watch in the afternoon and errands to run and emails to check. We've come full circle. Instead of piling rules upon rules, we've turned the Sabbath into just another day.

So, what do you think, do we still need the Sabbath? I'm thinking we do. I'm thinking that in a piled-on, plugged-in, stretched-to-the limit world, we probably need it more than ever. I'm thinking that far too many of us have backs that are bent and are almost ready to break.

If that's true, then how can we do a better job of keeping it? *We can start by building some margin into our lives.* We usually think of "margin" as the space on the edge of the paper, but it's more than that. Margin is breathing room. Margin is the space between our load and our limit. The truth is that many of us are close to reaching our limit and we have no margin left

My daughter Ingrid is an administrative assistant at Ameriprise Financial. One of her jobs is to keep track of her boss' schedule. She says that he's always juggling at least three things at once, sometimes four or five. A meeting here, a phone call there, a transaction that needed to get done yesterday. There's absolutely no margin built into his schedule. So, if anything goes wrong, his stress level goes through the roof.

You know what this looks like. Margin-less is being 30 minutes late to the doctor, because you were 20 minutes late getting out of DMV, because you were 10 minutes late dropping off the children at school, because the car ran out of gas two blocks from the gas station and you forgot your wallet.

Margin, on the other hand, is having breath at the top of the staircase, money at the end of the month, and sanity left over at the end of the day. Margin is grandma taking the baby for the afternoon. Margin is having a friend to help carry the load. Margin is building some intentional space into your schedule. *In a 24/7 world, margin is a form of Sabbath rest. It's essential for our well-being.*

How can we keep the Sabbath? *By slowing down.* Our culture is afflicted with hurry sickness. We will buy anything that promises to help us save time. We multi-task in an effort to get more things done. We look for the fastest lane on the highway and the shortest lane at the supermarket. Our world has become the world of the Red Queen in *Alice in Wonderland*. One day the queen says, "Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that."

Believe it or not, Jesus had the same problem back in his day. Life was busy for him too. So what did he do? He repeatedly withdrew from crowds and activities. And he taught his followers to do the same. When the disciples returned from going out 2 x 2, they were all pumped up and ready to do more. Right away Jesus told them, "Come away...come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

What a novel idea! What would happen if we tried slowing down? How about driving the speed limit? How about letting someone go ahead of you in the check-out line? Jesus is our model. He was busy, but he never seemed rushed. He had a lot to do, but he never neglected his relationship with the Father. His busyness never seemed to interfere with his ability to love the people around him. Was Jesus busy? Yes. Hurried? No. *In a 24/7 world, slowing down is a form of Sabbath rest. It's essential for our well-being.*

How can we keep the Sabbath? *By making worship the priority it needs to be.* The woman with the bent back, after she's healed, immediately starts praising God—she's worshipping. Worship is meant to be a central part of our lives. So why does it seem that whenever we get busy or worried or stressed, church is often the first thing to go?

In a previous congregation, I got an email one Sunday afternoon from one of my parishioners. She was thanking me for the sermon that morning. She wrote: “I woke up this morning and was getting ready for church. Just then I received a phone call informing me that my 19-year-old son was in jail. He’d been picked up late last night on a DUI. We’ve had ongoing concerns about his use of alcohol. This only confirmed it. The last thing I wanted to do was go to church.

“But I came. Your message spoke directly to me. ‘Families are not perfect,’ you said. I know this, but it never hurts to hear it again. ‘People in your family can drive you crazy,’ you said, ‘crazy with worry.’ And then you went on to tell me that ‘I have a place to belong here at church.’ In the midst of all this mess, I really needed to hear that. Thank you.”

Worship is important in our lives. God has things to say to us. Sure, there are going to be weeks when we cannot make it to church. I understand that. That’s all the more reason, then, to redouble our efforts to carve out quiet time during the week. Personal devotions are a form of worship too.

David Levy is a professor at the University of Washington’s School of Information. He thinks we’re an “information crazy” age, almost near the saturation point. He argues that we need to be careful to protect our psychic space and quiet time. So what is David Levy doing about it? As an observant Jew, he’s rediscovering the value of Sabbath. From sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday, he doesn’t use email, the Internet, telephone, radio, or TV. Instead, he slows the pace dramatically and spends time with family and friends. And he lights the Sabbath candles. And he prays. *In a 24/7 world, carving out time for worship and prayer is a form of Sabbath rest. It’s essential for our well-being.*

Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. That’s what God is telling us today. It’s for our own good. A woman on overload comes to Jesus. Her back is bent and almost ready to break. Jesus heals her on the Sabbath and restores her life.

Some days our lives are on overload too and we’re stretched to the breaking point. God offers the Sabbath to us as a remedy. But to realize its effects, we’re probably going to need to make a few changes: to build some margin into our days, to slow down, to make worship the priority it deserves to be. Keep the Sabbath, God is saying, and you will live. AMEN