

Sermon on Luke 13:10-17
11th Sunday after Pentecost, August 25, 2019
& Commemoration of the First Slave Ship Landing in Virginia in 1619
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

So is today's gospel a healing story, is it a gospel of liberation, or is it a lesson in the law of love? Ah, that is a good question to chew on this Sunday morning! I think it is all three wrapped up in one burrito – so this will be a sermon with three points. The unifying theme is that it's all good news!

It all goes back to the beginning of Luke, to Jesus' first sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth, in which Jesus unrolled the scroll, read from the prophet Isaiah, and said: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”*

So we see how in the gospel of Luke, Jesus' preaching, teaching and healing were all intertwined. He preached of God's power to set us free, he taught that God heals us by setting us free from the sickness and evil spirits that hold us in bondage, and when he healed people, he rebuked the fevers and exorcized the demons from their bodies. Jesus had power over fevers, leprosy, paralysis, which left their victims on his command. It only took a word.

Throughout the gospel of Luke, we also see the Sabbath day as the setting for Jesus' teaching and controversy with his adversaries over the purpose of the Sabbath. Early on in Luke we saw the disciples plucking grain from fields and eating them – on the Sabbath. Some Pharisees asked Jesus “Why are you doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?” Jesus answered from scripture, how King David and his companions entered the house of God and ate from the bread of the Presence – which was unlawful, but permissible because they were hungry. From then on, the Pharisees watched Jesus to see whether he would cure on the Sabbath, so that they might find an accusation against him. So, another Sabbath, Jesus asked, *“Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?”* So Jesus took a man with a withered hand, right there in the synagogue, and healed his hand in front of them all. The man was healed, and filled with joy. *But they (the Pharisees) were filled with fury and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus.*

After that Sabbath of preaching, teaching and healing, Jesus chose his twelve disciples and went to a level place where a crowd had gathered to touch him for his healing power, to give what we call his “Sermon on the Plain.” *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry*

now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.” Good news and blessing to people suffering from imprisonment, poverty, disease and persecution, who will all rejoice and one day leap for joy.

Fast forward to today’s gospel. Jesus once again was teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. A woman entered who *had a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years, bent over and unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.* That should have been the end of it. A great miracle of healing, which had set this woman free from eighteen years of suffering! That was the purpose of Jesus that day, to set her free, back to her community. So she rejoiced, praising God for this great new “lease on life”! Wouldn’t you?

But no, it was the Sabbath, and the great controversy as to the meaning of the Sabbath and the intent of the law prohibiting work on that day, came up once again. *For the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.”* (He had a point, I guess, albeit a weak one. What was one more day of suffering by an invisible woman, in order to “obey the law”?) But it was a callous, unfeeling response based only on obeying the “letter of the law”, while ignoring its spirit.

So Jesus replied: *”You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?”* When he said this, *all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.*

Jesus, of course, used the minimalist argument to argue that if it were lawful to bring your domestic animals to water on the Sabbath, surely it is lawful to heal a human being on the Sabbath. But the larger argument that Jesus “won” is that of crushing the “letter of the law” argument of his adversaries – who pointed out the law’s technicalities, by pointing to the purpose of the Sabbath: to focus on the grace of God, who shows mercy on all God’s children – ESPECIALLY on one who suffers – and to celebrate when God shows forgiveness, mercy and healing ON THE SABBATH DAY! This is how we honor the Sabbath day and keep it holy. For in Luke’s gospel, even the Ten Commandments arose as a response to the power and grace of God, who had heard the cries of God’s people in bondage

in Egypt, and set them free. Like Miriam and the Israelite women, let us rejoice! That's the good news!

The good news also is that Jesus noticed this suffering, bent-over woman, had compassion on her, and raised her up to stand for the healing power of God, who notices all who suffer. As Isaiah said to those returning from exile in Babylon long before, what God did for them, and what Jesus did for the woman, is given for people of faith to do today. Not that you and I can free a whole nation from bondage, or heal a person with a word or a simple touch. At least I don't have that power! But you and I do have the power to pray, to open our eyes and notice when a person is suffering, and to speak up and offer God's grace in our own ministry of healing. Perhaps it's a prayer, or the laying of hands as we do in worship, or maybe it's a hug, or a foot massage, or holding the hand of a dying person. We have God's power of mercy and the proclaiming of the gospel as our charge.

There is something else, too: the proclamation of the gospel of love when the letter of the law seeks to destroy the human spirit. We can truly see this today in our world. You have likely heard that our church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, declared itself a Sanctuary Church in churchwide assembly two weeks ago. Many are still wondering about this and what it really means, as we are a mere 9,000 congregations and about 3.3 million members, most of whom didn't have a vote in this. However, many more are rejoicing to this witness to the gospel that we are boldly speaking up about safety and welcoming for undocumented immigrants and asylum seekers – both on the southern border and in our own communities in Minnesota. We are a sanctuary church and a Welcoming Church here at Redeemer, but this can mean a lot of things.

It also brings up some controversial questions, about which everyone doesn't agree. To bring up the obvious, "is it lawful" for people of faith – churches, LUTHERAN congregations, synagogues, temples or mosques – to follow the "Law of Love" to provide safety and shelter to undocumented immigrants, single adults or families with children, even if there is an order of deportation? People of faith will disagree on this. It would be against the present "letter of the law" in the United States, even though we all agree that the law – and the immigration system – is now broken. We need new laws, but with our present laws, some things may be "illegal". But after all, harboring Jews was illegal in Europe during World War II. We can argue that there is a higher law, the spirit of the Law of God, which commands us to welcome the stranger, care for the suffering, offer food and shelter to the hungry, the homeless, and to love our neighbor. So it will be very interesting how this all develops in the coming months and years.

One thing we can certainly do is advocate for immigrants in courthouses and at the state legislature, and support candidates who see the challenges immigrants face and will work for changes in our laws. Last spring many of us supported

changes to drivers license laws for immigrants at the Minnesota state legislature. One evening I testified at a legislative hearing to make these changes called "Freedom to Drive". I based my testimony on Paul's writing in Romans 13 verse 10, that "*Love is the fulfillment of the law.*" When the law is unjust, or causing needless suffering among the people, the law needs to be changed – which is why we came to the legislature in the first place. Oddly enough, two representatives, opponents of changing this law, addressed me directly, and based their argument on scripture – the same chapter from Romans, but verse 1: "*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for...these authorities that exist have been instituted by God.*" Didn't I believe in following the law? But Paul continued by saying "*love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. All the commandments (do not steal, do not murder, etc) are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.'*" (Romans 13:1-10)

I didn't win the day; the present imperfect law still exists, and immigrants without legal standing cannot obtain a drivers license. Maybe next year! But I believe our responsibility as people of faith is to make our point: that love is the fulfillment of the law, and base our laws on love, not fear, and not cause undue suffering.

This also goes for the national situation, and for the present crisis at the border. Is it lawful to provide safety for asylum seekers, immigrants, and children, and allow them to cross the southern border? Is it lawful to place them in detention or separate families? Is it lawful to provide them adequate shelter in detention, provide medical care, food, clean facilities, showers, or even a toothbrush? It depends upon which law or procedure you follow! ICE procedure says no entrance, and you don't have to provide proper care, if cruelty is the point, and if migrants are not really human beings. If you follow international law, it is of course lawful to provide proper care! If you are a person of faith, or a Christian, you have ethical decisions to make about what is legal, what is lawful, what is just. The Lutheran Church as a body has made a case for the welcoming and compassionate care of immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees, based on scripture, and our Christian tradition of caring for the suffering and loving our neighbors. There is a whole lot of discretion and debate ahead of us, because people of faith can disagree about what this means in specific actions. We don't even have to "break the law" to be a sanctuary church. But we are declaring a point of view, that we Lutherans will look at people who cross the border to come to the United States as human beings, with compassion, not attack them as enemies or threats, "bad people", rapists and drug dealers, as someone has said. We will treat them with compassion, advocate for new, just laws, and strive for addressing the root causes of violence and poverty in their countries of origin, to solve this

crisis. This is how we honor the laws of this land, of love, and the Sabbath proclaimed by God.

I close by quoting from the prophet Isaiah, our first lesson: *“If you remove the yoke from you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness... Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in. If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day...if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; then you shall take delight in the Lord, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth.”*

Lord, give us the strength to be your witnesses of love. Amen.

Let us pray:

On this day when we commemorate the 400th anniversary of the first enslaved Africans arriving in Virginia, we repent for not seeing all your people as made in your Holy Image. We ask you to uplift and support all the descendents of slaves and to help us work for a just economic and social system, especially for those most suffering today from the continued effects of slavery, Jim Crow laws, racially motivated violence, immigrant detention and mass incarceration. Create in us, your church, the faith, the will, and the ability to work toward New Life together for all your beloved children. Hear us, O God, **Your mercy is great.**