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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16)
August 21, 2022

Lectionary Year C: Isaiah 58:9b-14; Luke 13:10-17

My Dad's career in management in the sugarbeet industry spanned at least two decades, with the other periods of his working life spent -- also in sugarbeets -- in the "gray collar" world of the chemistry lab and, just prior to retirement, in a niche the company called "technical services" that was carved out for him. Looking back on what I remember of Dad's professional life from my formative years, those years in management, from about 1975 to 1993, comprise the bulk of my memories of my Dad's work outside the home. It was very demanding and often unpopular work that he had to do in order to provide for his family, but, thankfully, my Mom, my sister, and I could be blessed by the fruits of his labor, as well. Speaking personally, I had a lot of things "paid for" that I knew I neither earned nor deserved!

There were those times, though, when Dad would be extra edgy -- like when the union would either strike or threaten to strike or when something went haywire at the plant during the processing campaign. And the job would often follow him home in the form of a briefcase (which he later referred to as his "guilt case") that contained things from work he was supposed to read, or a two-way radio that filled our house with the banter of boilerhouse foremen, mechanics, machinists, and sacking station supervisors...but rarely a call for Dad himself. And then, after the campaign was over, the pressure was off, but my Dad had colleagues who were also his friends -- and guess what they'd talk about.

Work!

However, my Dad always used up his vacation, which, after a few decades with the company, had become quite generous, and, most important to me, in retrospect, he kept the Sabbath holy. There was always time to go to church on Sunday. And I went even when I didn't want to go, likely out of fear of the consequences of disobeying Dad.

Dad became known for his other Sabbaths, as well; the aforementioned vacation time was largely spent fishing on the lakes of northern Minnesota, and then there were his at-home diversions which included auto mechanics, electronics, amateur radio, and, later, computers. In the evenings, after dinner, my Dad's decompression time following what was probably a horrendous day at work consisted of fiddling with some kind of electronic device or another; in the ham radio days, he enjoyed communicating with people far away with the help of powerful equipment and big antennas. These communications were commemorated by something known as, in the ham radio world, QSL cards; my Dad would send and receive dozens of them regularly. One such card, postmarked March 31st, 1978, has made it back into my hands thanks to collectors who sell that sort of stuff on eBay. The QSL card that I found includes, in my Dad's script, a confirmation of transmission via CW (which is Morse Code) on March 26th, 1978 to a ham operator named Jerry in Randallstown, Maryland. But the seller of this QSL card was not Jerry himself; instead, it had made its way into the hands of a collector in Montreal, Quebec. When I found it on eBay, I had to have it.

Dad's diversions from the perils of everyday life seemed to take him as far away from "work" as possible. Actually, the ham radio got him farther away than most fishing trips ever did -- Randallstown, Maryland is at least a thou-

sand miles removed from northern Minnesota, relative to where we lived. And I suppose Dad's hobbies taught me their importance in bringing some sort of balance to my life, even though mine aren't exactly the same as his. (I would be happy, too, to have even a fraction of the mechanical and technical aptitude that he had; I think that working on cars and the like has come a little harder for me than it did for him.) But all of this is, in a roundabout way, pointing to Sabbath and Sabbath-like activities that provide what the Lord intends for us -- a day or a time of rest and refreshment and an opportunity to clear our heads.

When we read our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah followed by our Gospel text from Luke, we might end up with a rather mixed impression of what the Sabbath ought to be. Isaiah says, "If you refrain from trampling on the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day...then you shall take delight in the Lord" (58:13a, 14a). Then, Luke records, "But 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'" (13:14). Thus, would Jesus' "work" of curing the crippled woman here be tantamount to the "trampling on the sabbath" of which Isaiah speaks? The leader of the synagogue would think so! In law, this would be described as a "strict constructionist" interpretation of the Sabbath; in the Old Testament, the Law and the Prophets are very clear about what ought not be done on the Sabbath, and therefore, their word stands as the absolute and final rule...no exceptions.

Jesus would argue that there are exceptions, especially when there is a greater good to be done. And he mentions, as well, that exceptions have already

been made for untying oxen and donkeys and the like. Remember, too, the greater good that's accomplished here, which Jesus points out; he says, "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?" (13:16). In other words, what better occasion could there be for this than the Sabbath?

Incidentally, modern Jewish law has resolved this matter, so if you fall ill in Israel on a Friday evening or a Saturday, the emergency rooms and hospitals won't be closed for the Sabbath! Some of Jesus' more lenient applications of the Law still wouldn't fly, though...

For the woman whom Jesus healed, the Sabbath would ever after be seen as a day of redemption and release, so here, the greater good would be her ability to observe the Sabbath with much greater joy and freedom than before. Besides, no harm was done -- only healing -- and if the only issue is a possible slight infringement of the Sabbath law, everyone should just cool it and move on.

Typically, the Gospels present religious authorities (often "scribes and Pharisees") as Jesus' main antagonists, and today's text is no exception. And it always seems as if their sole purpose in any given situation is to ruin everyone's day! Certainly, the incident described in today's Gospel has us all on a positive trajectory; Luke records, "When [Jesus] laid his hands on [the woman], immediately she stood up straight and began praising God" (13:13). Then, as always, the leader of the synagogue enters the scene like a grumpy headmaster and sucks all the joy out of it. Such portrayals of Jewish religious leaders in the Gospels are now dealt with much more delicately due to how easily they can lead Christians into outright anti-Semitism. Actual Jewish

scholarship might show that these religious leaders were nowhere near as one-dimensional and rigid as they're portrayed by the Evangelists themselves. I believe this needs to be said because Jews have been labeled "Christ-killers" for far too long...

So, what constitutes a Sabbath? I'm not, perhaps to your surprise, going to offer a "strict constructionist" answer to this question. Yes, it is the day that God has given us for worship and for rest, but this day cannot be Sunday for a lot of people because of work and other commitments, and it might be next to impossible for them to reorganize their lives to make Sunday their Sabbath. Thus, it is well and good for folks to set aside another day, or at least part of a day, as a Sabbath. I do that. My Sabbath is Monday, although I still worship on Sunday, obviously! As for what may or may not be done on the Sabbath, it appears that Jesus gives us some leeway on the matter. In light of this morning's Gospel text, however, we could think of Sabbath activities as those that bring healing, renewal, and (yes) diversion amid our increasingly worrisome lives. Looking back at my Dad, I now understand the appeal of keying Morse Code with Jerry in Randallstown, Maryland, even though I might not be inclined to do the same thing. But I myself have discovered the necessity of Sabbath-like activities that are similar in spirit.

And through those activities, we can more fully appreciate the healing and renewal that Jesus brings not only to the crippled woman, but also to us. We, too, are recipients of his gifts of healing, whether our wounds are visible or invisible. And we know that the greatest healing of all is of the invisible wound of sin -- where Jesus suffered, died, and rose on the third day, so that our relationship with God the Father would be restored.

By all means, let us keep the Sabbath holy...and let the Sabbath keep us
healed, renewed, and refreshed as God's redeemed sinners in Jesus Christ.

Amen.