

SERMON 21st AUGUST 2022**“HEALING ON THE SABBATH”****By Rev Dr Fei Taule’ale’ausumai***Pentecost 11: 21 August Luke 13:10-17*

Working on a Sunday. Does anyone have a problem with it? If we did how would society function? We can romanticise as much as we like about today being the sacred day for not working, or for worship. But if any of us are in hospital, it would be strange if no one was there to care for us because it was Sunday. In the Samoan language, the day for Saturday is “Aso Toonai” which is translated as the day for preparing Sunday’s meal and Sunday is know as Aso Sa, which is the sacred day or aho tapu in Tongan, or aho faiumu in Niuean. But who brings you the food to eat on Sunday, it just doesn’t miraculously appear out of nowhere. Work has to happen otherwise we should fast on a Sunday to really honour what it is all about. In the 1980’s Sir Michael Jones renown All Black for not playing on a Sunday. I believe that any outstanding rugby player with the same beliefs today probably wouldn’t be chosen, that it would be difficult to sustain such a value in this new millennium generation. I could be wrong.

Jesus was arguing these same points with the official in the synogogue. He said, aw come on, you untie your animals from the stall and take them water on the Sabbath. I suppose it’s like us having to drive to church and stop to put petrol in the car. There are tasks that are inevitable, there is no way around them.

Why couldn't the woman have waited for another day? No one objects to healing. But why not do it on a work day? It all sounds rather trivial I think.

First, we look at the conflict between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue. The account begins with the observation that Jesus "was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath" (13:10). He was doing what a prophet should be doing on the Sabbath. While we are not told from what text Jesus was teaching, his healing of the crippled woman may have been no more than a carrying out of the implications of the text.

The indignant and persistent protest of the leader of the synagogue was based on a reading of Exodus 20:9 and Deuteronomy 5:13 that categorised Jesus' actions as work that should have been done on a weekday. Challenged, Jesus responds with a sharp criticism of the synagogue leader's reading of the Fourth commandment. He uses a clear and homely example to expose the fallacy of ignoring the woman's infirmity on the Sabbath. The crowds immediately get the point, and the leader of the synagogue and his cohorts are "put to shame."

One of the things to which the leader of the synagogue is blind to is the remarkable restoration of a "daughter of Abraham". The illness this woman had had meant the disruption and loss of social relationships, exclusion and therefore loneliness. What Jesus' action did was not only to bring physical wholeness to the crippled woman, but also to reinstate her to legitimate membership in the community of Israel, a fitting behaviour for the Sabbath.

Jesus spent much of his ministry, it seems, in a struggle to portray a different way of imagining God which more matched the reality. God is

not to be modelled on the aloof king and powerful father, but the mother looking for a lost coin and the dad running down the road to meet a lost son. The facades of dignity are dropped in favour of affection and caring. It is a very different model of God and produces a very different way of handling human life and biblical tradition.

Both models represented in the story reflect deep devotion. Both in different ways protect some things that are valuable. Both are based on scripture.

For us, what are the issues that we stumble on that detract us from addressing the real issue? Was the argument for the Jews one of healing on the Sabbath or was it one of putting the commandments so high in the order of priority that following the law took precedence over helping another fellow human being?

What are some of the types of paralysis that can keep us looking downwards most of our life? What do we need to do in order to be freed and healed so that we stand upright and look at all that is around us?

Jesus' reply points to the need to water animals on the sabbath. One could argue that that was necessary for survival. But the woman would have survived another day. She had been in this state for eighteen years! It is not a very good argument. In fact the real issue lies elsewhere. It is not about the finer points of what might be permissible. Jesus is not really playing the game of competing interpretations and when we think he is, he is not very successful. The counter is weak and off hand because Jesus' understanding of the Law is quite different. His basic assumption is that God's will (in the Law as elsewhere) is focused on people's well

being. Elsewhere he states: ‘The sabbath was made for people; not people for the sabbath’ (Mark 2:27).

He is not riding roughshod over the Law and replacing it with new ways. Not according to Luke and Luke is probably reflecting ancient sources which reflect the approach of the historical Jesus. Luke reports that Jesus said: ‘It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for stroke of a letter of the Law to be dropped’ (16:17). Jesus upheld biblical law. His conflicts were over how to interpret it.

The theology which informs Jesus’ attitude appears to be absolutely opposed to the theology reflected in the leader of the synagogue. Both would affirm that we must love God with the whole heart and soul and strength and that this needs to show itself in action. For the leader this meant: keeping the commandments. That made sense. Behind it is an image of God saying: I am God. I must be obeyed. I alone deserve your loyalty and service. That also makes sense. The outcome is: we seek to know what God’s commands entail, how they apply, and we keep them. Simple as that! Our devotion is reflected in the extent we take that challenge seriously. I could just as easily be describing what many Christians have seen and still see as the universal duty expected of all. Is it not also what Jesus himself would have said?

What is God really like? What if God’s chief concern is not to be obeyed, but something else? What is God’s chief focus to love and care for people and for the creation? Then the focus moves from God’s commands to God’s people and world. It is as though God is telling us to get our priorities right. Commandments, rules, guidelines, traditions, laws, scriptures are also subordinate to that purpose: love. God’s focus is not about self-satisfaction and greed and success as it is with so many who

have power and wealth and want to keep it, but generosity and giving, restoration and healing, encouraging and renewing. When any of these means (commandments, laws, scriptures) cease to be seen in that light, they become ends and we find people in absurd conflicts about whether they help someone in need or obey God. When those become alternatives, something has gone terribly wrong if you believe God's chief concern is caring concern for people.

In the account of the bent-over woman, Jesus does not say that she is healed, but rather that she is "set free from [her] ailments." His saving act fulfills part of the mission he had announced when reading from the scroll of Isaiah (Luke 4:18-19). For 18 years a generation the woman was bound or captive. Jesus has come and set her free.

Her life is radically changed. She is no longer in physical bondage, nor is she a social outcast, as people of her day with physical disabilities were. She responds by praising God for this liberation. And she is not the only one who responds. Everyone in the synagogue where Jesus had been teaching saw what had happened, and they also rejoice.

Everyone, that is, except the leader of the synagogue who opposes Jesus and demands to know why he dared to heal on the Sabbath. The issue here has to do with "who's in charge." Jesus was teaching in the synagogue, but he was not playing by the rules. He did not seek authority from the leader, but acted solely on his own authority.

As for Jeremiah, although he was called to be a prophet at a young age, Jeremiah assumed the authority to pluck up and pull down, to destroy and overthrow, and to build and plant, as we learn in the story of his call from Jeremiah 1:4-10. Just as Jesus encountered opposition from the religious

leaders, so did Jeremiah. They questioned his authority and rejected his message.

In the story of his call, Jeremiah is assured of God's presence with him from the beginning of his life, a refuge he no doubt called upon time and again in his life as a prophet, a life with no shortage of enemies. The bent-over woman rejoiced – how will we respond to the nearness of God's reign?