

C Lectionary 21 8.21.22

Luke 13:10-17; Jeremiah 1:4-10

Focus Statement: If Not Now, When or Best Sabbath Ever: The Kingdom of God is Liberation

I don't usually title my sermons, and I definitely don't usually title them like PhD dissertations, but this one has a title. A title that, giving credit where credit is due, I took from the Sermon Brainwave podcast I listen to every week, so thank you Dr. Karoline Lewis and Dr. Matthew Skinner for this. The title of today's sermon is: "If Not Now, When or Best Sabbath Ever: The Kingdom of God is Liberation." If Not Now, When, or Best Sabbath Ever: The Kingdom of God is Liberation. A mouthful, I know, but that's where we're going this morning.

That's where we're going, but we're starting with a story about, of all things, parliamentary procedure and Robert's Rules of Order. We use sort of a loose version in our council meetings because we're a legally organized corporation under Michigan law, and we have to for important business. Mostly we work by consensus. This is partially because there's eight of us, nine if it's the beginning of the meeting and Eileen is still on for the Treasurer's report, so we can get away with it, and partially because I in general hate Robert's Rules of Order. I find it bulky, ineffective, and hard to manage. I know the point of it is to hold structure in a meeting so that all voices can be heard, but in my experience at best it wastes time because people don't know how to navigate it and we end up bogged down in minutia, and at worst people DO know how to navigate it, and they are able to manipulate the rules to shut down conversation. True story/classic example from Churchwide Assembly just last week of the battle between ineffectiveness and calculated effectiveness. Very first

session, we are trying to agree on the agenda for the week, an agenda encompassing twenty-one hours of meeting time spread out over seven sessions. Fifteen minutes in, one side gets up, they want to add three hours to the discussion time by cutting a bunch of informational videos, eliminating breaks, and lengthening the sessions themselves. Other side gets up, they do not want to do this, and they are skilled in the ways of parliamentary procedure. In the end, we add half an hour to the discussion time, that half an hour spread out over all seven sessions, so between three and four minutes a session, and the discussion time to do that took, wait for it, half an hour. We spent one continuous chunk of half an hour, time that could have been spent working through the agenda, to add a half an hour's worth of three-to-four-minute chunks throughout the rest of the week. Also, unrelated but interesting, in the end we got through the whole agenda with fifteen minutes to spare, meaning that both the extra half an hour and the wasted half an hour were completely superfluous, but I digress. The point is, my sense of parliamentary procedure and Robert's Rules of Order were, there has to be a better way to do this.

That is, until I sat in meetings chaired by Bill Horne. You may have heard me talk about Bill or read things about him in ELCA publications. Bill served as Vice President of the ELCA, second only to the Presiding Bishop and highest lay officer, lay being a church word for not a pastor, in our denomination. Bill passed away unexpectedly last year, so I only served under his leadership for two years. But in those two years, I learned a lot about how to run a meeting. Because Bill could run a meeting. In his professional life, Bill was the city manager for the city of Clearwater in Florida, before that he'd served as an officer in the Air Force. All that to say, Bill knew meetings and bureaucracy. He was a master at procedure

and bureaucracy. And what made Bill's leadership unique was he understood the heart and intention of Roberts Rules and could use them as such. Under Bill, I came to see how parliamentary procedure is meant to function not as a boundaries to constrain an unruly assembly, but as a solid framework upon which generative discussion could grow. Far from shutting down discussion, I watched how Bill use this structure to open space for dialogue, coax out conversation, and allow all voices to be heard, so that the best possible solution could be reached, the most ideas explored. This ability came not just from Bill's technical skill as a moderator—and he was very technically skilled. But technical skill is not enough. Bill's ability came from how he used that skill through the lens of a deep love for this church and for God's people. Bill understood that proper parliamentary procedure for procedure's sake was not the end goal. The end goal was the unveiling of the kingdom of God, parliamentary procedure was a tool to help in that unveiling.

And at the risk of making Bill sound like Jesus, I think this balance of technical skill and a heart for God's people is what our Gospel text for this morning is getting at. Our text for this morning once again finds Jesus in a bit of a verbal sparring match with religious leadership over the law, what it means, how to interpret it, and, most importantly, now to apply it. The story doesn't start there, however, the story starts with a woman, bent over for eighteen long years, finally receiving liberation. Notice my word choice there, not healing but liberation. Freedom is really what is at the heart of this story, her being bent over is a metaphor for her being constricted in the community, unable to live out her full place because of the expectations placed on her by others. Jesus set her free by healing her so she could stand up straight again, but there are a lot of ways a person can be liberated

that do not involve their being changed. We talked about this in Family Camp this week, glasses can be a form of liberation for someone with limited vision, or learning braille, or large print type and the beeping noise at crosswalks. Gender neutral bathrooms can be a form of liberation. Policies that work to address income inequality and give people the opportunities they need to lift themselves out of poverty. Sometimes, most times I'd argue, the path to liberation means healing not the person, but the structures around that person that keep them oppressed.

But for this woman, liberation did mean her healing. Which Jesus did, immediately. And of course, no sooner had Jesus liberated her than a leader of the synagogue appeared to argue that such activities have six other days to take place, this day is meant to be a day of rest. Jesus, if he was the religious leader he claimed to be, should certainly have known that. I also think it's interesting here that the religious leader is described as speaking not to Jesus but to the crowd about Jesus, showing us something about this fellow's true motivations I think, but again, I digress. The point is the Lord, notice too here that Luke switched from referring to him as Jesus to referring to him as Lord, a subtle reminder of just who we're dealing with, the Lord made it abundantly clear not to the crowd but to the religious leader himself, that he DID know the law, not just the letter of it, but the intention behind its purpose.

The obligation to rest on the Sabbath day is referenced several times in the Law. What constituted work was not clearly spelled out, though later interpretation listed thirty-nine different categories of work to refrain from. The point of the Sabbath however, clearly

spelled out, God worked six days and rested, you too should work six and rest one. And, further, Deuteronomy makes clear that the command to Sabbath is for all people, “you” but also “your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the foreigner in your towns, so that your male or female slave may rest as well as you.” The text explains, “Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there... therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day.” The Sabbath is a day of liberation from work, a day to remember that God liberated you, and you also must offer that same liberation to others. Sometimes liberation means rest, sometimes it means lifting the bonds of others so that they may rest. This may mean you need to do a bit more work in the short term so another may also be freed, but the nature of the kingdom of God is liberation, and you cannot be free if another is in bondage.

And the people rejoiced, best Sabbath ever, because they saw liberation. In front of their very eyes they saw sabbath for sabbath’s sake, not as a law to constrain an unruly people, but as a frame on which a healthy society could be built. Where there was a balance of work and rest, play and labor, rules that create freedom rather than contain it. They saw sabbath for what it was meant for, to build up the flourishing of God’s people.

Jesus’ healing on the sabbath also speaks to the urgency of liberation. The kingdom of God is for freedom, and freedom cannot wait for the day to be right. If the law does not create life, then the law may not be wrong, but the way it is being carried out certainly is. Law in the kingdom of God is not meant to contain, it is meant to uplift.

So that's the good news, dear people of God. The kingdom of God is a kingdom of liberation. God wants for us the best sabbath ever, a world of rest and work, play and labor, joy and struggle, so that all might flourish in the kingdom of God. And this best sabbath ever is not a future promise, it is a thing to be strived for right now, every day and all the days, so that we can begin to live in this promised kingdom now. That's the good news. The challenge is equally urgent. The challenge for us is to take a hard look at the laws we live under, and more importantly the laws we enforce, to make sure we are enforcing them in a way that is true to the intention of the kingdom of God. I use the word "law" loosely here, because I do mean law in a legal sense. There are certainly laws that do not build up God's people, laws that were not written with that purpose in mind, and those laws need to be either undone or rewritten, and that is work for us. But there are unwritten laws as well that we live under, as well as religious expectations and obligations, laws like that, laws whose clear purpose is life, sometimes still have a tendency to be twisted like we saw happen today, to become not about life but about control. God's law is clear, but our application of God's law tends to be slippery, and if that application does not lead to flourishing, for us, for our neighbors, for the whole of creation, then we have missed the point. Our challenge, and also our work and our joy, is to be about the renewing of that interpretation, the rebuilding of the intention, so that ALL of God's people have a framework from which to build lives rich with purpose. What a privilege and joy to be about such work. Thanks be to God. Amen.