

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
8:00 and 10:00 a.m. Celebrations of Holy Eucharist
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost; August 25, 2019

“Compassion Above All”

Scripture: Luke 13:10-17 (11 Pentecost C, Proper 16. RCL)
Note: Creek Baptism Sunday

“It is so easy to make rules, yet maybe harder to understand when they need to be broken.”¹

But when a woman crippled 18 years comes into your presence, and you have the ability to make her whole, do you withhold that from her? That’s the matter before Jesus this morning. He is just doing what any faithful Jew is expected to do on the Sabbath day... spending time in the synagogue for prayer, learning, teaching, and worship. But when this bent and broken woman appears before him, Jesus notices... and not just her infirmity; he notices her humanity —maybe more than most anyone around her had ever noticed— and he heals her, takes away her illness and infirmity, and helps her stand tall, without pain, without shame, for the first time in eighteen years. Surely no rule should prevent something like that, right? Yet Jesus is reprimanded by the leader of the synagogue, because the rule says... no “work” is to be done on the Sabbath Day.

¹ Quotation from *Currents in Theology and Mission* (June 2004); gleaned from *Synthesis* for August 25, 2019.

But if that leader is looking for an apology from Jesus, he does not get it. Jesus does not apologize for this supposed breach of infidelity to the Law. Not in the least. In fact, he calls out the dishonesty and the hypocrisy of the leaders by reminding them that even their own Law allows them to untie and lead their beasts of burden to water on the Sabbath day. And the Law allows this, because to do so was considered an act to relieve the suffering of a living thing. Compassion, healing, the relief of suffering, are apparently not ever considered an affront to the Law, rather a fulfillment of it. And isn't that good news, at least for the suffering? And are we not, each one of us, able to be or become that suffering person who one day may well need the compassion of another person to help us up, to treat us with dignity, to help relieve our own suffering as best they can whenever they can?

As followers of Jesus, we may well be called to some fairly conspicuous acts of compassion, kindness, and selflessness. These acts won't always make sense to everyone. I mean, why should we be kind to a stranger? Or welcoming to homeless persons? Or helpful to the sick? Or concerned for the hungry? Well, at the very least, because we may well one day be the stranger, or the homeless person, or the sick person, or the hungry person. But also because we're asked to be that way. By Jesus. There's something about being this way, being compassionate, that makes us faithfully human, that heals our humanity. We're called to some fairly deliberate acts of

hopefulness and optimism and joy, even in the darkest times. And not everyone will understand this. We may be seen as unrealistic or silly or in denial. But we follow the one who shows us what it means to love without condition, the one who asks us to trust that God is present and at work even in a world torn by division and strife. We're asked to be compassionate in times of real trouble. To celebrate life even when life is hard. We're asked to tell the truth when the truth is no longer of value. We're asked to see the good in others, when some may tell us to live in fear of others. We're asked to hold to an ancient faith in God in the face of advancing unbelief and the emptiness of hopelessness. Some people may think that's nuts, but for 2,000 years, we've called it... faith. Look, I understand we can't always do everything that people want of us, and we can't always fix everything that ails us or others, but we can care. And just caring sometimes seems to break the rules. But caring can be, in and of itself, a real motivator for good, and sometimes even just caring can seem like work. But we're called to persevere.

“Bless the Lord, O my soul,” says the Psalmist...

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.
Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.”

And from Isaiah...

If you remove the yoke from among 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,

Right? If you stop oppressing each other, blaming each other, bad-mouthing each other, and start feeding each other and caring for each other...

then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. Then the healing begins.

So, I think we have to fess up to this, and I mean it with all due respect, but, you know... Jesus is a bit of a trouble-causer. He doesn't always follow all the rules, and he doesn't always offer the deference expected of him from the people in charge. But it's not like he's terribly disrespectful either. And I think that's... pretty good news for most of us. Because Jesus decides to go to work, even though the rules say "work" is forbidden. But the work he chooses to undertake isn't labor, unless it's a labor of love. And his efforts aren't even for himself; they're for the sake of others. It's a real reminder of God's call to compassion above all else.