Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost – Zach DiMiele

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

Let it not be said of Jesus that he was an able politician. He often did not ease God's people into righteousness. With the precision of a surgeon, this great physician cut deep into the logic of those who sought to rebuke him. "Don't you untie your oxen and your donkeys to give them water on the Sabbath?" he asks them as one who knows what kind of mischief his neighbors get up to in the pre-dawn hours. "If it's against the rules," he says, perhaps impishly, "then why do you do it?"

Why indeed? The apparent indiscretions of Jesus often drive us to wonder why. Why would Jesus break the Sabbath? The Sabbath is, after all, a lovely institution. We find its foundation in the very first pages of the Bible, whereupon God, having just created for six straight days, takes a bit of a nap on the seventh. The commandment to keep the Sabbath reverberates throughout all of Scripture. It is not only the reason we find Jesus at the synagogue in our Gospel reading, but it also informed the rhythm by which God's people Israel engaged the created world—seven days in each week, with one set aside for rest. This rest was required also of slaves, Gentiles who worked for Israelites, and the animals. Even fields were left fallow every seventh year and debts forgiven.

Of the weekly rituals of Sabbath themselves, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel has written beautifully, saying, "We often feel how poor the edifice [of worship] would be were it built exclusively of our rituals and deeds which are so awkward and often so obtrusive. How else express glory in the presence of eternity, if not by the silence of abstaining from noisy acts? These restrictions utter songs to those who know how to stay at a palace with a queen." (Heschel, The Sabbath 14-15).

See all the good that Sabbath does! See the beauty expressed by the minimalism, the staid tradition of the thing. What a marvelous expression of worship! Maybe it has its problems, sure, but nothing we can't talk out.

How like a madman Jesus must have seemed, how completely irrational. He just went and broke Sabbath at the drop of a hat, as if the synagogue leaders didn't care about this woman too. Surely they did. So what do we make of his behavior?

I can't help but remember another time when a voice of prophecy spoke to a people seeking rest and rejuvenation. On our anniversary this past June, Amanda and I went out to dinner, and on this particular evening, Amanda and I were walking down the street with some ice cream to check out some sort of party. It turned out to be an upscale-type block party complete with cocktails, cigars, a band, and incredibly drunk rich people. We didn't stick around. As we were leaving, we heard chants in the distance, and coming up the way we were headed was a small group of Black Lives Matter protesters chanting "No Justice, No Peace!" and "If we don't get it, shut it down!"

Amanda and I followed this group with our camera phones at the ready, nervous for a possible altercation. What actually happened was not physical violence, but it was deeply disturbing. People were annoyed and dismissive. One girl behind me said, "Ugh, here? Really?" as if they had ruined her night. While the protesters proclaimed the horrors that beset black lives in the United States, the band just kept on playing, and one young white couple, dressed as if it were the fifties, I kid you not, began to dance mere feet from the protesters. When confronted with the sins of a nation in which they were complicit, these people hearkened back to another time when zoot suits and poodle skirts danced instead of marched, and sang instead of chanted.

How crazy these protesters must have seemed, how irrational. Many of the party-goers that night might have thought, "It's not as if we don't care about black lives."

I believe that the synagogue leader probably did care about the woman Jesus healed. And I trust that some of the partygoers who felt annoyed by the protesters considered themselves allies of the Black Lives Matter movement. But even so, we find in our Gospel lesson that Jesus is still unapologetically disruptive of the order of things.

So why did Jesus break the Sabbath, and in so brash a manner? I think it's because when God's children are hurt because of Sabbath, it is no longer Sabbath.

And that means the Israelites had to, and we have to, reimagine Sabbath in the light of Jesus. We have to ask, how do we reimagine worship?

Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz writes of her experience of a "spirituality of the picket-line." For her, holiness is characterized by participating in *la lucha*, or the struggle for liberation. She rejects prescriptions of serenity and solitude as signs of holiness because such prescriptions have historically been used to prop up a status quo that has been killing people. After all, if we think that holiness is equated with serenity, then it becomes all too easy to laud those who keep quiet while demonizing those who speak the truth, loudly, and without apology.

This is what was so rankling about Jesus! He just didn't keep quiet. He spoke up. And what's more, he listened. He listened to the voices of the dying and those in pain. They will not be ignored. Their voices inspired action! So why did Jesus break the Sabbath? Because it was already broken.

Why do we have a Black Lives Matter sign outside? Or why do people feel the need to proclaim black lives matter at all? Because society is broken, and we believe that to ignore it would be dishonest.

Why has there been such a plurality of dissent in the church at large and within this congregation on the matter of including the LGBTQ community? It is because the church is broken too. We are all broken.

But we come here today gathered in the name of the one who restores us from our brokenness, and we seek to follow the example of that one, Christ.

St. Paul's has not ignored the disruptive voice of Jesus. We have heard the protests calling for justice, and we are still figuring out how to express our continued support for Black Lives Matter. And we have begun conversation, in the light of recent sermons, to discuss whether and how to include those in the LGBTQ community. This is important work. And it's also, as Jess acknowledged for us last week, exhausting—and disruptive in its own right. And it will continue to be exhausting and disruptive. I want to encourage us not to lose a sense of urgency. Let's not waiver now.

We have to continue the conversation. But as one of the Free Methodist bishops has written recently, the phrase "continue the conversation" is often used to be "evasive and disingenuously dismissive, to [imply] interest in continuing a conversation when there is none. It is used when people have no intention to ever draw a conclusion." We must be careful to not fall into this trap. Our siblings in faith have come to us saying that our theology has hurt them, that our worship alienates them, that our silence outside these walls is killing them. We have heard them, and we must keep hearing them. And we need to keep figuring out together how best to diagnose the wounds and begin their healing.

How healing happens, and the pace at which it happens, is something St. Paul's will decide as a community. But we are right to think, as our conversations and actions already have shown we do think, that the time to work for healing and freedom is now. We can't put it on the back burner now that we've started the conversation. We can't wait until the block party is over to acknowledge the wounds in our midst. We can't wait till Sabbath is over. If we do, Jesus will say, *Ought not this woman … be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?*

I confess, I was afraid of this sermon. We've had quite the crop of youthful preachers this summer, preaching some very tough sermons. And I so desperately did not want these words to be written off as those of just some kid with hopes and dreams, or worse, of a naïve provocateur recently returned from seminary. But then I read our Jeremiah text for this morning, and it compelled me to disallow fear to determine my actions over and against what God has said in this morning's texts. Consider me… cautiously emboldened.

Jeremiah was afraid to speak out because of his youth, but God forbids him from allowing fear to drive his actions. God chose to speak through him too.

One of my favorite professors in seminary often says that any church without old women is in serious trouble. I believe she's right, and I think we need to hold this together with Jeremiah. I'm reminded of something C.S. Lewis wrote. "Someday, we will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again."

Maybe we can remember, **together**. Maybe we can remember what it is like, not only to believe in dragons, but also … that dragons can be beaten.