

Luke 13.10 What about the rule?

Have you ever thought about what Sunday—the Sabbath is all about, not in terms of what is proper, but in terms of what God desired when God established it. We have grown up with certain expectations about what Sunday means: it is a day set aside for the gathering of the community of faith. A time of worship, singing, reading the Word and preaching—the activities we are doing this morning here in the sanctuary. When I was growing up—what we are doing was more the norm for everyone than it is now—especially since what were known as Blue Laws were still very much the rule and the options for the day were few. But as we do this, do we think about what the point of Sabbath was? Our gospel reading this morning begins as do many of the stories about Jesus with him being in the synagogue teaching on the Sabbath. He attended and participated in the normal worship of his faith. But like a couple of these narratives, Jesus doesn't keep strictly to teaching—but sees someone in the crowd and heals them. From our earliest records of the Hebrew people, Sabbath keeping was important for the faithful observance of those who worshiped God. The lectionary passage from the Letter to the Hebrews for today speaks of the interactions of those who fled Egypt under Moses' guidance with the God who provided for their escape. When God spoke to them at Mt. Sinai they were given commandments which were part of the covenant which God made with them. God chose them and the commandments were God's expectations for their relationship not only with God but with others. In the most concise form, these commandments are called the Ten Commandments and the first recording of them has as number 8 this rule: Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and consecrated it." (Exodus 20:8-11). This same injunction appears in Exodus 23:12, 31: 12-17 and 35: 1-3. As the instructions get repeated some additions are made including that there be no fire kindled within the dwelling places and violations of the Sabbath are to be punished by death. Rules about what the Sabbath was to be and punishments for failing to keep it. In the repetitions this day is to be set aside as recognition of the covenant which God created with them. This same importance for a Sabbath observance is found in Deuteronomy as well with the added interpretation that connected it to God's liberating them from slavery in Egypt—God had freed them and on this day they were to remember that. When the prophets Amos, Isaiah and Jeremiah spoke to the people of their disobedience, failure to keep the Sabbath was often mentioned. In fact, the passage from Isaiah today puts before those Israelites returning from exile this promise from the Lord: "If you refrain from trampling the Sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the Sabbath a delight and the holy day of the Lord honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs, then you shall take delight in the Lord." We see from this that the importance of the Sabbath is present, but we also can sense that it is framed somewhat differently. The prohibition can be seen as the same—as doing nothing defined as work—but it is framed as honoring the day and God by not pursuing your own interests. The prophets often criticized the people for observing the Sabbath and performing the rituals, but then thinking about how they were going to conduct

their business later—usually how they were coming up with schemes intent on their own profit—not justice or righteous behavior as demanded by God. With this background we are setting the scene for Luke’s passage. The opening verse finds Jesus as expected in the synagogue teaching. Also present is a crowd who has come to hear him speak and the leader of the synagogue. In the crowd is a woman who is crippled, bent over and unable to stand up; a condition which has lasted eighteen years. Jesus, seeing the woman calls to her and says, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” He lays hands on her and she immediately stands up straight and begins to praise God. The synagogue leader instead of celebrating with joy this freeing of the woman tells the crowd this is a violation of the Sabbath they are there to celebrate. Based on his understanding of the Law he has been trained in, the leader of the synagogue indignantly objects to this healing because Jesus has cured on the Sabbath. He quotes the rules he has always known telling the woman: “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.” It may be a bit challenging for us to see that the synagogue leader is correct in what he says because we clearly see that anything Jesus has done has to be right. But the leader of the synagogue is right in his summation of the law. Jesus rejects what the leader of the synagogue says calling him a hypocrite—and we usually instantly see this as two different understandings of the law given by God. The synagogue leader is committed to the literal interpretation of the law as he has received it. He says, “what about the rule we were given about the Sabbath”. That is a refrain that should sound familiar to us. It is often our reaction to the changing of the rules we know—we like to be able to set standards, draw clear lines and object when someone does something differently. Jesus is contending that beneath the surface of those laws there lay a deeper intent by God—the welfare of those in need. You don’t keep laws for the sake of keeping laws, Jesus seems to suggest, but rather for the greater intention they serve. After all the literal meaning of Sabbath was rest—it was included in the portion of the laws meant to govern the relationships between members of the community—those commandments designed for the establishment of a community which cared for its members. It was included for a people who had been in slavery where rest was not possible for them. Being able to rest was a reminder for them of what God had done for them in bringing them out of Egypt—they were freed. What Jesus has done has brought relief—Sabbath rest to this woman. The leader of the synagogue has missed the point of the commandment. Jesus points out to the leader and the crowd that their animals are given care—led to water on the Sabbath—so caring for someone in need has priority over the rule. In this case, breaking the law actually fulfills it. This might simply be seen as the difference between a liberal and a conservative interpretation of the Law. But perhaps also is a reflection of something different we need to remember about the point of the Sabbath which is the connection to being freed from bondage. Jesus says that this woman’s freedom from the bondage caused by her condition should not wait—it is important and needs to be done without delay. Jesus points out that it is permissible to set someone free on the Sabbath because the Sabbath is all about freedom. When we are like the synagogue leader and view our Sabbath, Sunday as an obligation—a duty—a rule which we follow, perhaps we are also missing the point. Sabbath—rest—is important for our well being, but beyond that it is also a time to remember what God has done for us. If we stop viewing Sunday as a day of religious obligation—something that we do for God and instead consider that Sunday is about what God has done and can do for us how different the day becomes. What a freeing concept. As we

remember the actions of God which have delivered us from the consequences of sin, what we do here becomes truly a celebration. And recognizing that, we can also look around and see what we can do for others. If we remember on Sunday morning that God has freed us from death itself, that God loves and cares for us all, then we have no reason to be afraid and can act to free others. What Jesus does in this story of healing is not to destroy the established rules, but instead breathes new life into them. He doesn't advocate for giving up the Sabbath but for making it a time of renewal, of healing and of true Sabbath. This is the good news that we can depend upon—not only today, but every Sunday—as we take time to rest and be restored—freed from the burdens we take up—because we know that God desires to provide Sabbath for us. Thanks be to God.