

What Does the Lord Require?

This is a question which we as Christians often ask. In fact, it is a question which people of all faiths tend to ask. It is a question central to how we find meaning in our lives. In the scriptures read this morning, the question seems to be centered around what is expected from people of faith on the Sabbath. What does the Lord require on that day? Since the three faiths based on the Abrahamic traditions begin with a creation story that establishes a Sabbath day as a day set apart based on God's pattern, that is not a surprising focus. However, do the traditions which have grown up in the communities of faith resemble what God desired when God established the Sabbath day? It would seem from both the words found in Isaiah and in the events described in Luke that the way human traditions developed have not exactly been according to what God envisioned for keeping the Sabbath. As recorded elsewhere there is this tendency pointed out that God's ways and our ways often part ways. We have grown up with the concept that the Sabbath is a day set aside; a day for the gathering of the community of faith for worship. This worship time tradition sets a pattern which would begin with some age appropriate Bible study, then a gathering for singing, praying, hearing scriptures read and a message proclaimed from one or more of those readings. That is pretty much the pattern that we follow today, although culturally a smaller percentage of the society around us joins us in that pattern. When I was growing up, what we do was the norm for almost everyone I knew. This was the culturally accepted way. Also because due to the existence of Blue Laws which governed retail and other businesses, there were few opportunities or activities on a Sunday morning to provide alternatives. That, of course, is no longer the case. Yet we still come, but do we give serious consideration about why...other than it is the tradition in which we were raised; what we believe, or at least part of what we believe God desires of us. When we examine the texts before us this morning, what do they seem to be telling us about what God desires from us, not only on the Sabbath but what the Sabbath was to be about. The scene described in Luke begins with Jesus where he is often found on the Sabbath, teaching in one of the synagogues. And what happens is very predictable—when a woman appears who has been bent over and unable to stand up straight Jesus sees her, calls out to her and heals her. The leader of the synagogue could have easily been a writer of some of the Blue Laws which prevailed earlier in our communities, or those even stricter practices in Puritan or other groups. Luke 13:14—“But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, ‘There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days to be cured, and not on the Sabbath day.’” This text operates on many levels. There is the physical cure, which is accomplished simply—and in terms reminiscent of Jesus' announcement of his purpose when he read the Isaiah scroll in an earlier synagogue setting. In verse 12, “When Jesus saw her, he called her over, and said, ‘Woman, you are set free from your ailment.’” He releases her from her bondage by the laying on of hands. His action is one of liberation, but it is done without elaboration or details. This release from eighteen years of being bent is described as happening through the action of a passive verb—where our translations read: immediately she stood up straight, the Greek text reads “she was straightened up” assuming this she was set free, straightened by an act of divine intervention. All Jesus did was to lay on hands between the divine announcement and the divine action; the

text implies divine agency. Jesus does not accept this criticism. “But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or is donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?” Additionally, he adds this: And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” This last reference when the synagogue leader tries to shame Jesus indirectly by pointing out that the healing was work—something that could be done on any of the six days set aside for labor instead of the holy Sabbath, Jesus then draws directly from the Torah to give him this response. Deuteronomy 5:12-15, connects the Sabbath rest to Israel’s liberation from slavery in Egypt. This woman’s need to be freed from bondage is grounded in God’s purposes to heal all relationships with God’s people. The synagogue leader is rebuked because he seems to not only be criticizing Jesus for his actions in freeing the woman from the burden when caused her to be bent, but to be telling others in the congregation not to bring any burdens into the Sabbath gathering—he implies there are six other days, “come on those days and be cured”. Jesus’ words are a rebuke to that as well. The synagogue leader would tell this woman to come another day, or to go to another place to seek aid, but Jesus says: no, this woman, and all those who are burdened are beloved members of God’s family and need to be set free. The story begins because Jesus sees this woman. Calls her over when she appears; lifts the heavy burden that bent her in half. Declares she is not just a child of God but a child of Abraham. Then he takes to task her congregational family who have too long ignored her need and failed to acknowledge her humanity. The reading from Isaiah also addresses Sabbath rituals. Chapter 58 is devoted to Isaiah’s vision of what YHWH desires as a response from the people with whom the covenant relationship has been established. Isaiah 58:6: Is this not the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?” These are not the activities that we associate with Sabbath or Sunday morning worship, but they are integral to the establishment of a “right” relationship with our Lord. Later in this passage we see the connection between these activities on the six days that are not the Sabbath and what happens on the Sabbath. It seems that refraining from injustice, caring for the marginalized are activities that the Isaiah passage describes as ones that are reflecting in having Sabbath observances that are pleasing to the Lord. Isaiah 58:13—“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.” What both of these texts point out is fundamentally the same truth. In Isaiah, God points out that fasting is meaningless if it is accompanied by economic and social oppression. The brief story in Luke is a miracle story: a miracle of healing, communal seeing, divine redemption, but also a story of rebuke and correction to all those gathered in the synagogue that day and in sanctuaries everywhere this week. Religious rules and rituals, no matter how sacred or beautiful, are secondary to addressing human suffering in our midst. No matter how long our prayers, how eloquent our preaching, how large our offerings, if we fail to notice those who are bent double in our congregations, in our communities, and in our world, if we fail to ease all that weighs them

down, if we forget that Jesus came to bring redemption, to bring release and free all of God's children, not just in heaven, but on earth, then we are like that leader in the synagogue. We have forgotten what the Lord does require of us.