

Homily on Luke 13:10-17

October 29, 2018

Most of us are offended by the callousness of this synagogue official. What made his sabbath interpretation so crass? To understand him we have to know something about the Jewish Sabbath.

The sabbath began as a command to give hard-working persons and their cattle, and even the fields, a day of rest from their ceaseless labors, just as their creator God had taken the seventh day of creation as a day of recreation. Sabbath observance was a sign of the Jews' covenant with God on Mount Sinai. It was not to be omitted even in the urgent times of planting and harvest, and so work on the sabbath was a capital offense. Jews even declined to fight on the sabbath, and so the Assyrians captured Lachish on the sabbath, and the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem on the sabbath. At the time of Jesus the Qumran literature lists acts prohibited on the sabbath---walking more than 1000 yards, eating food prepared on the Sabbath, aiding a beast giving birth, lifting an animal fallen into a pit, and many more. The rabbinic tradition is filled with such sabbath regulations. Violation of these rules was a denial of their covenant with God. You can see why the Pharisees were so incensed at Jesus' healing on the sabbath.

But Isa 58 had called the Sabbath a day of delight, and it became a day of liturgical feasts and family festivals. Jews went to the synagogue and then the rest of the day was a feast of family interaction. When I lived in Jerusalem I was invited to a conservative Jewish Sabbath. Because of refrigeration the food prepared the day before was tasty and filling, and the day was spent enjoying one another in the family. (No work, no soccer, no I-phones, just play and time with one another.)

Luke: This was the essence of the sabbath that Jesus was restoring. The sabbath was a benefit for humankind: Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath." The sabbath was recreation, and, in this case, restoration of health to a bent woman.

Two Meanings for us, one positive and one negative:

We have lost the practice of the sabbath and it is a great loss. We need a whole day to be reminded that God has created our world as a joyous and sacred place. But we work on the sabbath; we have no time for God. And we have no time for families. At a time when families are torn about by conflicting work schedules, and by the children's commitments to sports and other activities, we need more than ever a day devoted to God and to one another. We need to have a holy day with God as our Father and one another as children of God. Think about restoring sabbath observance on your Sunday.

But like the synagogue official we also have lost the meaning of rules. Rules are not an end in themselves; they are the means which lead us to their real goal. Rules of silence in a classroom are a means to learning, but when a teacher makes them too rigid, they thwart the joy of inquiry. Rules of fasting make us aware of the sacredness of Lent or of the Eucharist, but when they become more important than the Eucharist itself, they lose their meaning. We need to be reminded that religion, relating to God, is not a matter of rigid rules but of guidelines for loving. That is what the synagogue official missed, and what Jesus understood.

Perhaps one of the reasons why people prefer to be "spiritual" rather than belong to a religion, is that their religion delivered rules, not love. Or the opposite, it delivered a pseudo love without the discipline that loving demands. Today's gospel gives us the opportunity to ask ourselves whether the rules of our religion are a pathway to God or a hindrance to love of God and love of neighbor. Now is the right time for us to ponder the rules of our lives, and to make sure they lead us to the good news of the Reign of God in our lives.