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First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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Healing What Ails Us
Luke 13:10-17

We stood around a rickety white Jeep, holding hands and singing, “Unidos, unidos, en su nombre, unidos...” as we sang, a nun threw holy water at the wheels and a shaman smudged sage on the hood. The smoke wafted around us, some fifty people -- old and young, hippies, students, and nuns, anglo and latinx – standing in the parking lot of Southside Presbyterian Church. We were there to commemorate the founding of a new initiative called Samaritan Patrol: an effort to bring humanitarian aid to the most hostile reaches of the Sonoran desert in the Arizona borderlands. It was 2002, and the number of people dying or experiencing serious medical distress while migrating through the desert into the US had skyrocketed since 1994. Why then? That was the year NAFTA went into effect, and though goods could travel more freely than ever before across the border, policies implemented at the same time made it much more difficult and dangerous for people to.

The Samaritans are part of a larger movement called No More Deaths, a coalition of faith and justice groups that advocates for immigrant rights and humane border policy. No More Deaths sends volunteers with some first aid and emergency medical training who search vast swaths of the desert in an effort to save lives. They leave water and food on migrant trails, and when they encounter dehydrated, hurt, or disoriented people, they help them by treating injuries, or calling for emergency assistance. They operate under the premise that no human being is illegal, and it is always legal to offer lifesaving humanitarian aid.

The government disagrees.

This past summer, you may have seen news of the trial of Dr. Scott Warren, a history teacher and No More Deaths volunteer who was charged with two felonies for harboring migrants. The judge declared a mistrial when the jury couldn't decide if Dr. Warren had broken federal law in January of last year when he was volunteering at a No More Deaths camp outpost. This is what he did: when two Central American men stumbled upon the tent, he welcomed them, and tended their feet, putting band-aids on blisters and offering basic first aid. He gave them food, water, and a place to rest. The jurors were asked to determine if he was

motivated purely by humanitarian concerns? Or did he seek to help the men evade border patrol? His re-trial is set for November.¹

The law, it seems, is always open to interpretation. Precedent determines how laws have historically been interpreted, and judges ultimately decide if current circumstances warrant new interpretations.

Jesus and the leader of the synagogue are having a dispute about the law – specifically, Jewish law about what a person can and cannot do on the Sabbath. How should God’s commandment to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy be interpreted?

Terry preached about Sabbath this summer, reminding us that Sabbath is time to stop, and reconnect to the goodness of God, to join God in finding delight in creation. In Genesis, Sabbath is when humans rest because God rested on the seventh day of creation. In Deuteronomy, humans are commanded to observe the Sabbath with rest and restoration, to remember God’s work of liberation in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. In the spirit of Deuteronomy, Sabbath frees us: frees us from exhaustion and overwork; frees us from captivity and frees us from burdensome debts. Some work is permissible so long as it seeks to relieve suffering, such as bringing water to animals. That’s the work Jesus is referring to when he challenges the rabbi’s interpretation.

My first year here, my understanding of Sabbath was challenged and expanded by Jeanne and John Plaxco. The deacons helped plan a service Sunday, organizing work projects around the church and at member’s homes on a Sunday afternoon. When I told the Plaxcos about the day and asked if they were planning to participate, Jeanne’s eyes got wide and her mouth got small. She gave me a little smile and said, “on a Sunday?! Service work on a Sunday?!” John’s father was a pastor in the Reformed Presbyterian Church. When he was growing up, Sunday was for going to church, and spending time with family. Likewise, when Jeanne and John’s children Jack and Margaret were young, they couldn’t go to the movies or football games on Sundays – the activities were limited to church, food, and family. But here I was, a minister, encouraging the church to plan a workday on Sunday?! In her own, gentle way, Jeanne let me know this was highly unusual.

What is a Sabbath? Is it a time to stop work, to rest, to be restored?

¹ Jordan, Miriam, “An Arizona Teacher Helped Migrants. Jurors Couldn’t Decide if It Was a Crime.” *The New York Times*, June 11, 2019.

Is it a day set aside for church, food, and family? A day to worship, praise, and otherwise ponder the mystery of God? Is it a chance to finally try a new brunch place, read the Sunday Times, and take a nap on the couch?

In this story, Jesus shows us that the Sabbath is not only for rest, not only for worship. The Sabbath is also for healing and restoration. In the assembly, he sees a woman who might not have been able to see him, so stooped was she by age and pain. For 18 years she has faced not her fellow worshippers but their dusty feet, the dirty floor. And scripture tells us, this is what he did: Jesus sees her, calls her over, and lays hands on her, and she is healed. He breaks not one but two rules here. He heals on the Sabbath. He also violates a purity law, by touching a woman who was considered unclean because of her illness. By seeing her pain, he is compelled to heal her. His touch restores her dignity, and straightens her up so she can stand as an equal with others in the assembly, joining them to praise God for her healing.

It's important, I think, that the woman doesn't ask to be healed. After 18 years, she is resigned to her disease, just as we become inured to the brokenness within and around us. We think it's just the way things are. But Christ doesn't see it that way. He sees the woman's suffering, and does what he can to relieve it, offering healing, and liberating her from her pain.

The rabbi can only see the law that has been broken. Jesus sees a person in need. For him, the right thing to do is clear— the Sabbath is for liberation, for healing, for restoration. No law is more important than showing mercy.

Which leads me back to that hot parking lot, in Tucson, in July, with the sun beating down, sage smoke all around, with the Samaritans. I have a vague memory of a legal clinic offered that day, people from the Red Cross and immigration lawyers explaining the guidelines for offering humanitarian aid. I didn't pay much attention. I was a college student, full of spitfire and righteous indignation, just awakening to the inequality, racism, and injustice that fractures our world. I was only beginning to feel the pain that still keeps so many of us up at night. I didn't realize what a radical move it was for a group of faithful people to try to be good Samaritans, seeking to save lives in the desert. It just seemed like the right thing to do.

For the past 15 years, Samaritans and No More Deaths have continued their lifesaving work and witness. It's become increasingly risky, as several volunteers

have faced federal misdemeanor charges and jail time for leaving water on protected land. But migrants are still dying – 88 between January and June of this year in the Tucson sector alone. And so they go.

Jesus surely knew that healing on the Sabbath was contrary to his community's practices. But he saw a woman in need, and he had the courage and the power to help her, and so he did. The road to the cross is paved with small, provocative acts of mercy like this. Maybe that's why this healing is followed by two parables about the kingdom of God: the story of the tiny mustard seed that grows into a huge tree, and the story comparing the kingdom to a pinch of yeast which leavens the whole loaf. Jesus seems to be saying that small acts of kindness matter more than we realize – indeed, they can change the world.

If the Sabbath is, indeed, for the healing, rest, and restoration of the people of God, then I wonder: who is in need of healing this day? What burdens bind us, weigh us down, cause us to stoop? What brokenness, sickness, or oppression have we come to accept as normal, as just the way things are? Do we have the courage and the power to take up the Sabbath work of healing and liberation?

On Thursday of this week, I was in another parking lot – this time, the lot outside of the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement office in Homewood. I was there with a group of people to protest the detention of a man named Marcos, and his son, Juan. Marcos is a board member of Adelante Alabama Worker Center, and his son just turned 18. They were caught by border patrol when they tried to enter the country years ago, and they've lived in this area a long time, reporting periodically to immigration authorities as their case wound its way through the system and they sought to gain legal status... until Thursday morning, when they were taken into custody, and transferred to the infamous Etowah County Detention Center. And so we gathered, activists and people of faith, to show our solidarity with these members of our community who had been taken away. We held hands, and sang, and sought to claim sacred space even in a parking lot, even in the midst of a broken and dehumanizing system. I don't know if our presence made any difference at all. Marcos and Juan are still at Etowah. What seemed like a disproportionate number of police showed up, sirens wailing, demanding that we leave the property at once, threatening to arrest us if we did not comply. And so we did, peacefully.

The situation is complicated, and it certainly would be easier to just look away. After all, the law is clear. That woman had been stooped and sick for 18 years, and

the Sabbath is for worship, not healing. But for Christ, there is no question about what should be done. And I wonder what that means for us.

One last thing... John and Jeanne came to the service Sunday. This is what they did: they stood in this sanctuary and they vacuumed the pew cushions, all 119 of them. It took more than two hours, as they slowly and methodically made their way up and down the aisles. I don't think they even took a break. We laughed together about my call to work on the Sabbath – but a job needed to be done, and so they did it, because they loved this church.

Thanks be to God.