

# Faith in the Face of Opposition

Part 3 of Sermon Series:

*Pillars of Faith*

a sermon based on

Luke 13:10-17

and delivered on

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at

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Today, let's spend some time with this passage from Luke. Let's start by looking at it from the perspective of the leader of the synagogue. For that guy, it's his job – it's his responsibility – to lead the Sabbath observance and to do it faithfully.

The commandment to honor the Sabbath – from Exodus 20:8-11 says,

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 the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Exodus 23:12 makes it clarify that Sabbath observance includes not causing others to work:

“Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed.”

Exodus 31:15 and Exodus 35:2 emphasize the expectation even more. Hear what it says in Exodus 35:2,

“Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy sabbath of solemn rest to the Lord; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.”

Honoring the Sabbath and keeping it holy is serious stuff!

Because honoring the Sabbath was so serious the rabbis developed all sorts of “rules” interpreting what counted as “work”. The Scripture passages handed down by Moses made it clear that you weren't allowed to cook on the Sabbath. You had to do the cooking the day before. Which meant that you were allowed to eat. Therefore, ladling stew into a bowl and then using a spoon to eat it wouldn't be “*work*.” Walking was allowed, as long as it didn't become *travel*. (based on distance). Exodus 35:3 (right after saying that whoever does work on the Sabbath shall be put to death – says “You shall kindle no fire in all your dwellings on the sabbath day.” You could keep it going, but you couldn't start it.

People still take these rules seriously. In communities with large orthodox Jewish communities like Skokie, Illinois, there are apartment buildings whose elevators stop at every floor – up and down – on the Sabbath so that people don't have to push the button. Even flipping a light switch is forbidden. If you want the lights on on Saturday, turn it on before sundown Friday. Skokie even has wire/cable looped around it defining the distance that one can walk so that it is a Sabbath stroll rather than travel.

It all seems odd to our ears but it's serious and it was serious for that leader in the synagogue. I don't doubt that he wanted the woman to be healed. It had been eighteen years. Couldn't Jesus have healed her the next day?

That's why Jesus speaks up. He points out that the Sabbath is a day to avoid “ordinary” work or for conducting business. When his disciples were accused of violating the Sabbath in Matthew 12 by plucking and eating grain (the accusers would have called it harvesting rather than just eating), Jesus recounted the unlawful consumption of consecrated bread by David. Something the priest only allowed because David lied.

He also pointed out that the priests still *worked* on the Sabbath by making the sacrifices according to the law. He pointed out that boys were still circumcised on the Sabbath. Why were these acts allowed? Because they honored God.

In Mark 3 when a man with a withered hand approached, “they watched him to see whether he would cure him on the sabbath, so that they might accuse him. ... (H)e (asked) them, ‘Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the sabbath, to save life or to kill?’ But they were silent.” (Mk 3:2 & 4)

So what is it about this healing that's different? Healing was allowed on the Sabbath. You could put a bandage on a wound or take care of an acute injury. The problem with this, was that it was chronic.

So Jesus points out the "chronic" need to lead an ox or donkey to water. Just for a little perspective here: The manger was an area carved out into the floor of the living room just next to the entrance (sort of like a foyer) where one's animals were kept at night. You didn't keep your ox or donkey in the house all day. So, Jesus says, you untie them from where they are bound – EVERY DAY – not just on that "rare" occasion when they get thirsty.

But this daughter of Abraham has by Satan for eighteen years! (Lk 13:16) We might even be tempted to skip that part – the parts that say she was afflicted by a spirit – or that she was being oppressed by Satan – because that's not how we talk about things in the church nowadays. But that's important. How can we honor God on the Sabbath, by using it as a day to stand up to the devil?

Jesus understood that the Sabbath was about honoring God and setting aside time specifically to honor God, that's why there was a command to refrain from work – not in an end of itself – but to create time to honor God. But he knew how people were – and are – how much we like clarity – and how clarifying rules can be. Which was more important? The comfort of the rules? Or that this woman might be freed from her oppression?

He caught flak. The leader called him out. He was risking his ministry by turning those in authority against him. We see that today.

When I was in seminary, a retired professor spoke to my class as a guest lecturer on the book of Revelation – about John's vision. He gave us some advice. He asked rhetorically whether any of us had had a vision, and then said, "Don't ever tell the board of ordained ministry if you have." Isn't that odd? But it's true.

In the most recent edition of Good News magazine, in an excerpt from her upcoming book *Supernatural: Exposing the Kingdom of God*, United Methodist pastor Carolyn Moore tells the story about an occasion when she witnessed a demon leave a man's body. She acknowledged that that was not something that she was ever taught to expect in all her time in The United Methodist Church. She says,

"Our culture has come to accept an hour in church and a blessing before meals as the center of the Christian experience. Meanwhile, driving out demons is just weird. That, we relegate to the fringe. But folks, when I read in my Bible how Jesus defines for his followers what it means to be sent out to represent the very best the Kingdom has to offer this world, this is what I hear: that followers have power and authority to drive out demons, cure diseases, proclaim the Kingdom of God, and heal things that destroy people's lives.

"This ought to be our target as we progress in the Christian life. We are not shooting for tolerable. We are shooting for transformation, and for lives that carry power and authority."<sup>1</sup>

That's not going to set well with some folks. It upsets our equilibrium. But consider some of the things that we do as disciples that face opposition. We've had churches in our own conference who were denied building permits because they intended to host a food pantry or emergency shelter.

The opposition doesn't always come from the outside. Mission trips bring out the opposition. "Why spend the money to go {there} when there is so much to do here?" Have you ever heard that one. Or "Why are we sending money to Africa, when there are poor people here?" Ironically, in my experience, the people who make the biggest stink haven't shown any inclination themselves to serve locally or to support local charities.

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<sup>1</sup> Moore, Carolyn. "A Supernatural Kingdom." *Good News*. July/August 2019.

When we act in faith, we will face opposition. In the text today, we see spiritual warfare taking place. By his actions Jesus said that Satan didn't get even one more day to torment oppress that woman. He did that knowing that people had become complacent and just accepted that things were like that.

We can't just dismiss the rules. Nor should we. As Christians and United Methodists, we have rules in place to help us to navigate what it means to love the Lord our God with all our heart, mind, strength and power. Those rules are useful. So when we challenge them, we will get some blow back. Sometimes that's good, because it keeps us in check. Other times, when we have a clear sense that God is calling us to act – that clear sense means assuring that it aligns with Scripture – that when we have that clear sense to act in faith – God will bless it – even when we face opposition. Faith in the face of opposition is shooting for transformation rather than the tolerable. AMEN.