

# SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

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*Fifth Avenue · New York City*

**Sunday, August 21, 2022**

The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

**Festal Eucharist**

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Matthew Moretz, *Vicar*

*on*

Luke 13:10-17

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## **Sabbath Work and Rest**

Now that I have two children, a lot has changed. I'm much more interested in what other parents have to say, about their children, about their lives. The ups, the downs, the detours. What they signed up for, and what they didn't. There was a discourse online that drew me in, not too long after our summer vacation. One parent said "'I just realized vacation with kids is not a vacation for parents. These are two separate things.'" Another agreed, saying that a vacation with children is about filling their child's glass, and not their own. But they could have known until they did it. Another commenter said that they had a coworker who refused to call them vacations, but calls them "family adventures" in order to set her mind to the right expectations, something both stressful and wonderful. For parents, vacation is meant to be a time of rest, but also for the making of memories, so even in rest, there is work to be done.

It is difficult to convey how much Jesus would have vexed his peers for his healing of the woman in today's Gospel, for this healing was done on a day when work was expressly forbidden. He was truly risking his life when he did not observe the Sabbath in the manner to which he was expected. "Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy." The command enshrined in the Ten Commandments, the crux of the covenant that was at the bedrock of their people. The Torah even seeks to clarify what was meant by this commandment by elaborating: Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates."

So it is as clear as can be. No work. But what is work? Not working for the sake of your household? Or for the sake of another's? What about God's work?

Jesus' critics weren't really interested in having this discussion. In John's Gospel, after healing a man at the Bethesda pool on the Sabbath, several of his own people and leaders set their hearts on killing him. There was nothing for them to say. Jesus heard of their deadly purpose, and tried to answer them. "My Father is still working, and I am also working." But this made them only more upset, and more driven to destroy him. Not only was he breaking the sabbath, but he was being too familiar with God. How does he know what God is doing, what God wants? How dare he suggest that he is closer than them, the ones who have dedicated their lives to holiness.

But Jesus truly digs in on this point. In today's Gospel, he would be seen as practically incendiary because he performs a Sabbath healing during worship, in a synagogue, while he is teaching there! To his detractors, this would have been horrifying: for a so-called teacher of the Torah to miss the mark so publicly and brazenly. The wonder of the healing, the woman's straight back, her prayers glorifying God, all of this would have been

snuffed by their fury. There was no joy or delight, for many. Just a sense of desecration. The leader speaks up immediately denouncing the healing publicly, he wants no part of it. After all, if he is seen to be condoning it, that would be the end of him, too. But Jesus' response is to point out that, even on days of rest and renewal, there is crucial activity to be done. He doesn't call it work, but he does point out what even they do on the sabbath. He says "Thou hypocrite!" another way to say this is "Thou underhanded judge! One who accuses publicly those crimes that they themselves do privately."

"Thou hypocrite. Doth not each one of you on the sabbath loose his ox or his ass from the stall, and lead him away to watering?"

In other words, with that action with your hands, the untying of the ropes, the releasing of the animal, you give life to those under your care, don't you? "And ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, immeasurably more valuable than a beast of burden, immeasurably more in peril, ought not this child of God, bound up by Satan for 18 long years, shouldn't she be loosed from this bond on the sabbath day?"

It seems that Jesus was convincing. In contrast to other times when Jesus seemed to break the sabbath day, in this case, the adversaries don't mean to kill him. They are ashamed, they seem to see what he means. And it says that the people rejoiced at the glorious things that he was doing. The leaders get out of their way and let them be happy at this unorthodox wonder worker.

There is certainly a place to talk about rest when we try to answer all the problems that we have with our work. But Jesus is calling us to have our experience of work and activity be transformed, or even restored to its proper place as joining our heavenly father in the ongoing work of new creation. A new creation that includes nourishment, healing, mercy, and grace. A new creation that continues no matter the day or night.

For Jesus, I even think his healing on the Sabbath is what that day was meant to be. He unbinds someone through his work, which is portrayed as work that freed the woman (isolated, judged, and rejected) to finally do the work that she and all of us are created to do: praise God.

She is freed to praise her Creator, and in that she is not resting from work, but she is resting in God, while directing her energy as a newly upright person, keeping the day holy by being holy, set apart for God's continuing creative work.

Inspired by Jesus' resurrection on the first day of the week, Christians now celebrate the Sabbath on that day when we celebrate the Paschal Mystery of Christ at the altar. Our worship celebrates not the Genesis picture of a day of rest upon the completion of creation but the first day of the new creation in Jesus Christ, a creative force that is still coming about, in which we are invited to join. Since the Resurrection points to the ultimate meaning of the Sabbath, I would think it is not too much to see this healing by Jesus as one of many foretastes of the Resurrection, an encouragement to celebrate new life from the bondage of illness and injury and social oppression. The healing of just one person seems a small thing, but the whole crowd rejoiced in the healing, indicating that healing one person entailed healing the whole community. Their rejoicing can be ours, too, and it shows us that the Sabbath Rest is not a strict, static existence but a dynamic rejoicing in the interests and healing of others, leaving no room for grumbling and rejecting God's blessings. We should be too busy rejoicing for that.