

The Stress of Life Part 2

Shepherd's Grace Church

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¹⁰Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But 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 and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." ¹⁵But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? ¹⁶And 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?" ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. (Luke 13: 10-17) (Also Read Isaiah 58: 9-14)

This is the second week of a three week series on stress. We hear our kids talking, saying "I'm stressed out!" We ourselves feel so much pressure and tension from everyday life and we must wonder, is it supposed to be this way. We are looking at this struggle from three perspectives. Last week, we reminded ourselves of the stress others feel. This week we are looking at the stress we experience in society. Next week we will consider how we deal with stress within ourselves. I hope you will allow God to guide you as you deal with this difficult issue that seems to have such a pervasive effect on our society.

Last week, as we began our series, I suggested stress as a kind of tension. It pulls at us and as it tugs, causes us to step sometimes in the correct direction, but sometimes in directions that are slightly off course. I love to take the dog out for a run with me in the morning. Our city requires that I keep him on a leash. I could just take the leash, but have you ever tried to push a leash? It sags and will not stay in front of you. The leash keeps getting tangled up in your feet and you trip over it!

When I put the dog on the leash, almost immediately there is a tension. I wish you could see the tension. The dog knows we are getting ready to go out for a run and begins to jump and yelp with excitement. He makes it difficult for me to get the rest of my gear ready for the run, so great is the stress he places on the leash. This stress pulls and tugs in different directions and I have to tend to it or we will be going in ways we do not want to go. I do not know why the dog chooses to go in the directions he wants to go but I know the pull and tug affect the direction I must travel. The stress between dog and runner is this constant pull of the leash that keeps us going forward, close to the same direction but sometimes in different ways.

This stress, this tension is necessary because we do not always have the same objectives. Sometimes, the dog wants to greet people he sees on the path. Sometimes the dog wants to chase ducks. Most times, I just want to finish the run because I get tired! The degree of stress is determined by the level of desire the dog and I have to achieve our own purposes.

Last week, we heard Jesus tell us about the stress he was under. He said we could not know the stress of the mission. He had fixed his face toward Jerusalem and only he and a few select others knew the outcome that was to be experienced there. In hindsight, of course, we know the stress Jesus was under is the cross. It pulls him and drives him and keeps him fixed upon

the course that has been chosen for him! He struggles with it because he knows the agony of its allure. He embraces it because he knows the ever present promise he has made to the mission of God! It is his work to re-establish the relationship between God and human, and the cross has become the only means available to accomplish that mission!

The cross serves to create a stress in Jesus' life and while he would like to lay it down, he cannot. He prays for release but in such a way as to invite the will of God to accomplish God's purposes. We cannot know the stress because we do not listen. In many places, Jesus tries to tell us but we are obtuse!

The nature of stress we experience in others is revealed in Jesus to overcome our obliviousness to other people's problems. Luke, the gospel writer who reveals this truth invites us to know that Jesus is fully human and experiences stress like all other people. He is subject to emotion and feelings and fears so when bearing a burden of great weight, he feels the anxiety of carrying it. There are two parts to the message Luke has for us here.

First, we worship and serve a God who has become human so He can walk among us and know the struggles we have. Because of this, we have no need to fear that He cannot understand us when we go to Him in prayer. There is nothing we have experienced or are experiencing on this earth that He has not experienced firsthand! What a mighty God we serve! One large enough to be the creator of the universe and still small enough to have engaged personally in the problems of His human creatures.

Second, Luke wants us to recognize that we cannot understand the issues of other people all the time. We cannot understand them because we cannot know them. We do not know their baptism and the burdens we bear so when we deal with others, we may occasionally get a response that surprises us. They may react with anger or some other emotion because they are carrying a burden we know nothing about. We can help others deal with their stress by not assuming it is our problem. We do not have to fix others but we can accept their struggle and embrace them with love. That is what Jesus is asking for in Luke 12.

While Luke 12 teaches us about the tension we deal with as we try to relate to others, today's passage invites us to deal with another definition of stress; emphasis. The way we stress something is discovered in the emphasis placed on our words! When I talk to our dog, Oliver, all I have to do is say to him, "Oliver, let's go for a run and he heads for the bottom of the stairs very quickly. There, he howls and moans while I get my shoes on. I don't have to place any emphasis on my words because Oliver and I are in agreement.

When we catch Oliver in the trash, getting something that we do not want him to drag all over the house, however, the emphasis is very different. Rochelle will try to say Oliver's name a couple of times in that sing-songie voice of politeness. Generally, Oliver pays no attention. I use a loud, harsh voice saying, "OLIVER! OLIVER!" and he looks up, knowing he has done something wrong. When I stand up and start toward him, speaking his name loudly, he is certain he is in trouble. He can understand the stress of the words, the emphasis and he chooses a different action based upon my stress!

As we consider the societal nature of stress today, it is this understanding, this emphasis that I believe our gospel lesson lends to. In the passage from Isaiah, the promise is clear. Return to the ways of the Lord, honor the widow and the orphan; respect the Sabbath! If you remember the tie I had on for today's message you would recall on it the 10 commandments. I often times remind you that the tie I wear encapsulates at least a part of the sermon message. Today it reminds us that there are 10 commandments and God does not relent about our faithfulness to any of them.

God does not revoke our responsibility to the commandment to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy. In Isaiah, God restates our responsibility. The Sabbath is to be kept as a day which glorifies God! It is a reminder not of rules but of relationships. In the message we hear this morning, we are told to return to the Lord, to keep the Sabbath day holy and to keep the commands God has given. The commands are numbered and we can argue if there is an order to them, that is to say that any one is more important than any other one, but God is pretty clear that we are to keep them all...and not just the "Big 10" but the other six hundred and three as well!

God cannot and does not tolerate sin. He cannot be in the presence of it. For this reason, even the smallest infraction of a command disqualifies us from God's presence. Therefore we can understand that to argue the numbers and importance is only a human exercise. It is not a Godly one. We have commandments we believe are more important. God may as well, however it is not for us to determine which of them is "God's favorite!" This is the point Jesus is making this morning as he enters the synagogue to teach!

A woman is there, possessed by a malady. It is referred to as a demon. The people of Biblical times believed all illness a form of demon possession. People who were sick must have done something wrong or allowed a demon or Satan to enter or they would not be having the problem they are having. God, after all, blesses those who honor Him and keep His commands! To have a health issue must mean that one has failed to honor God.

Jesus purpose on this Sabbath day is to teach. He is Rabbi and one of his primary functions is to teach. He enters to teach. As the woman is noticed by him, he is trying to teach. He does not wish to take focus away from his lesson so when he notices the woman, he simply says to her, "you are set free of your ailment." Then he lays hands on her and she is healed.

In the 21st century, there are many who wake early on a Sunday morning to hear and see such healings. We watch and wonder at the healing that takes place. Many investigations have been undertaken to determine the validity of what we are seeing. These investigations are met with mixed reviews but we continue to watch. We watch because of the stress of healing stories in the Bible. We watch because Jesus stresses healing and wholeness above rightness and rules. We watch because we want to see this stress brought to bear on the whole of society.

Those present on this Sabbath day in the first century watched for the same reason. The Pharisees and scribes had spoken in a vacuum of prophetic leadership for the past four hundred years. They filled in the gap that is often called the "silent years" where God's direction was seemingly absent and human direction was stressed.

The onlookers on this day witness the opening argument of a debate. Jesus, proposing a change in understanding, stresses the need to understand Sabbath in terms of relationship. When he notices a person in distress, he immediately puts aside all else and proceeds to her side. Societal stress is all about the emphasis. It is all about defining terms and understanding relationships. It is not about tension as we discussed in the first of these sermons or about pressure as we will discuss next week.

So often, when we are trying to understand why large crowds or even small ones react the way we do, emphasis is what we need to consider. When a preacher talks about racial tension, frequently he or she is trying to make a point that issues of race are part of our system. Especially in the United States, struggles with race have been written into our laws and even into our governing documents themselves.

We all know that in the original constitution, slaves (insert word Negro here) are counted as only three fifths of a person. From the very beginning, issues of race have been stressed to illustrate that one segment of society is somehow inferior to another. It has taken two hundred years to overcome the stigma of this stress and most of us would argue that the stress placed on this single oversight has not been overcome at all but merely buried deep within our laws and codes, our rules that have sought to override our relationships!

Stress, or emphasis helps us define our terms. It is not a bad thing but a necessary thing. It helps to move understanding, provide clarity and help to create clarifying conversation! This stress moves us to a place where we can understand and talk with clarity about our differences, recognizing that we are a nation not made of laws but of relationships. To be sure we must have laws to govern but within the law it must always be stressed that who we are is a nation "of the people, by the people, and for the people." Our stress must always be on the people!

Jesus affirms this today as he defines the Sabbath in terms of the people. The Pharisees have moved during the silent years to place restrictions on the Sabbath. They have defined how far a person could move without it being considered work. I don't know about you but for many, the one hundred steps they set as a limit were and are a considerable effort. For most, the act of turning on a light switch in the 21st century is effortless and the understanding that this starts a fire is nebulous and obscure at best. We can understand that creating light in the first century or before was challenging and tedious but today...come on! And yet, the law continues. The interpretation coming from the Pharisees of the first century was as a result of human contemplation and not Divine direction!

Jesus, on the other hand wanted to say, "It is much simpler than this!" In chapter 12, he asked which of us would not help an animal who had fallen in a hole on the Sabbath. Of course, it is difficult to imagine even in the 21st century that we would pass by a struggling suffering animal. In the first century it was recognized in much the same way. People would stop, they would help, they would work! Today, Jesus pushes the argument even farther stressing that we would even go so far as to lead an animal from a manger to water, not to save the animal's life but to make sure the animal was cared for. His argument was clear. Sabbath is not about rules! Sabbath is about relationships!

The leader of the synagogue was Jesus' worthy opponent in this argument. His logic was simple enough. We have always done it this way! For four hundred years, we have followed the leadership of the Pharisees. For four hundred years we have carefully considered the rules and we must be a nation of rules. God has given us six hundred thirteen of them and we must keep each and every one of them...but especially we must keep the ones God gave first.

Of course, the leader is remembering the description of creation as he says this. In Genesis 1: 30 it is written that for six days, God labored and on the seventh, God rested. He is remembering that we are to be like God in our daily lives and we are to follow God's leadership. He says, "There are six days in which work can be done. Come back on any one of those days and be healed but not on the Sabbath!" He wants to stress the nature of rules. As he defines terms, rules are absolute! They are not to be changed, they are not to be negotiated, they are not to be broken! Rules are rules! The definition is clear!

Imagine the temerity of this leader if you will! Here he is standing before the very God of Creation telling the author Himself what was intended in the original message given by Moses! How he must have struggled and how he will sweat when he stands before this one again on the day of judgment. We cannot say how the conversation will go, but we can imagine as the leader stands in line and sees the one who will judge worthiness what might be going through his mind.

“Better him than me,” we might think but as we think we might also remember that in the moment of stress, in the moment of emphasis, Jesus needed someone to make the other side of the argument. It would have been easy for him to say to those gathered there on that Sabbath morning that Sabbath is not about rules but about relationships but how much more effective to have someone stress the other side of the argument.

Societal stress has devolved in our nation to a place of political correctness. People are not encouraged, in some cases are even discouraged from presenting opinion opposite to that of the majority. Perhaps we need to read carefully the message given by the evangelist Luke this morning and recognize that opposing opinions are not to be scuttled but instead shared! We need to hear other opinions. We need to open our minds to alternative ideas and we need to be willing to change our minds!

Before Jesus came along, all good Jews kept the Sabbath in a very specific way! They followed blindly the rules set down by the Pharisees and they maintained the strictest of understandings of them. Jesus gave them a new emphasis. He gave them a new stress. Keeping the Sabbath day holy goes beyond resting on the seventh day. It goes additionally to honoring God, to honoring father, to not killing, not coveting, not committing adultery! Keeping the Sabbath goes to teaching, to learning, to desiring to deepen our relationship with the Living God who came so we could be saved.

In Jesus argument, in the fullness of the argument, he stresses that all have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God. There is no one, not even one who has been able to keep all the commandments except Jesus himself.