

August 25, 2019

*AS Much as You Can, As Long as You Can*

Shepherd's Grace Church

<sup>10</sup>Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. <sup>11</sup>And 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. <sup>12</sup>When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." <sup>13</sup>When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. <sup>14</sup>But 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." <sup>15</sup>But 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? <sup>16</sup>And 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?" <sup>17</sup>When 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)

<sup>9</sup>Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, <sup>10</sup>if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. <sup>11</sup>The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail. <sup>12</sup>Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.

<sup>13</sup>If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, from pursuing your own interests on my holy day; if you call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honorable; if you honor it, not going your own ways, serving your own interests, or pursuing your own affairs; <sup>14</sup>then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of your ancestor Jacob, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (Is. 58: 9-14)

Every year, Grace Hill Winery offers the opportunity for people from surrounding towns and cities to come out to the country and help with grape harvest at the winery. The winery used to offer this opportunity for free as a fun way for people to escape the stresses of the city and step back to a simpler time. In recent years, they have had to charge for the privilege of volunteering.

It seems that people would call for reservations for the free picking events and then not show up. Meanwhile, others who did call for reservation had to be turned away because the winery could only handle so many volunteers. The result was that some people were turned away, others stayed home, and the winery did not have enough volunteers to pick the grapes they needed to have picked.

A few years ago, the winery started charging a nominal fee for the opportunity to come out and pick. They added a catered lunch and a free water bottle. When people actually had to pay to come out to pick, it seems they showed up.

I was mindful of this yesterday as Rochelle and I loaded Albert and Francesco into the truck and headed out to Grace Hill Winery. I mused as I drove, wondering when it came to be that your money was your bond. Didn't it used to be that your word was your bond? Didn't it used to be that if a person promised they were going to do something, they did it and you could count on it?

When did it become necessary to hold a promise with a check—not even a check anymore but a credit card because a check is not a guarantee of payment. Most places do not even take them anymore. It seems that even the promise to pay was not sufficient to cause someone to keep their word. When did it become necessary to hold a promise with money?

Come to think of it, when did it become necessary to hold a promise to volunteer with money. That is what we were doing yesterday when we were picking grapes. We were volunteering. We were coming out to help a neighbor in just the way farmers came out to help with harvest for other crops planted in the fields.

Many of you are aware of how this voluntary aid works. Especially during harvest time, when one field is ready to be harvested, the owners of the fields surrounding will leave their own work to go to the aid of another farmer so that he or she can get their harvest in. People will gather and work for as long as it takes to complete the assigned task. They do not charge for their effort. They help because they know that when the time comes for their harvest, everyone will show up to help them.

They do not send a check or give a credit card to make reservation. They show up because they work together to grow products and get them to market. They commit to one another that they will be there and their word is their bond. Sometimes they work long into the night using only the light from their machines to guide their activities.

When it is time to eat, they stop and the meal is brought out to them in the field so they do not lose valuable time. They have promised to help and they do not waste the time they have to help by traveling back and forth. Besides, as I understand it, who would want to miss the spread that is set before them at those times. The food is spectacular and the deserts are legendary.

The point is that there is no contract compelling these people to show up. There is no written agreement between the farmers. They show up to help because they have said they would. They commit and they honor their commitments.

Many of you know Phil Osborn cuts the grass for our church every week. He does it as a volunteer and except for the weeks when it rains, which have been pretty much every week this year, he does a pretty good job.

Most of us don't think about who is going to cut the grass or clean the building because we have people who volunteer to take care of those things for us. They have promised to be here and to do the work required of them. Still, I wonder how they would respond if we asked them to give us a credit card number to secure their reservation to volunteer.

Of course, we would never do that. Church is a place where a promise is still a promise. Church is a place where when we say we are going to do something, everyone trusts that we are going to do our level best to do that something.

The world used to be that place but that world is not our world anymore.

These were some of the things I was thinking about as we turned down the lane that led us to the winery yesterday morning. When we arrived at the vineyard, the first parking lot was full of volunteers. There were license plates there from Kansas City and Wichita. There were cars from Missouri and Oklahoma, from Nebraska and other parts of the surrounding area. People had come from miles around, securing their opportunity to volunteer with their credit cards and showing up.

The first parking lot was full and the second was filling fast as I found a place for us to park. Going inside, we found our names secured by the deposit we had made, checked in and proceeded to grape picking orientation. People were excited and enthusiastic about the work they were paying to do and I still was wondering when we were all going to realize we were paying this farmer for the privilege of harvesting his grapes.

Then we stepped into the visitor center. It was a large room with glass windows looking out to the south. The view from there was very different from the view of any other farm in the area. There, for as far as we could see were grapevines. It was as if we had stepped into a different world.

I had been to large farms before, farms with corn planted for miles, wheat ranging over one hill and onto another and another after that. These are farms common to Kansas, but vineyards are not common...at least not that common. The images took me far away from this place, this land where I had grown up. It took me to a place I had seen once and for only a short time. It took me to Israel and the words the prophet Isaiah shared with us this morning.

"Remove the pointing of your finger," the prophet said. Do not place blame. Do not withhold what you have from another who is without. These are words of commitment and promise. These are words we are invited to live by. These are words that have power and the ability to change lives!

To be reminded of these words was worth the price we were paying and even more. The words reminded me of accountability. So often, we look for the cheap or the easy way out. How can we save money? How can we save time? How can we have more? These questions are often answered by determining how others can have less. The process has been defined by prominent economists and the "zero sum game."

The game is defined by a finite amount of resource. There is only so much; so much money, so much time, so much stuff. If we want more, then someone else has to get less. As I gazed out the window and thought of the words of the prophet, I was reminded that in God's Kingdom, that is not true. In God's Kingdom, helping and sharing are understood for what they are. They are acts of love.

When I gazed out at the vineyard, I realized that the vines planted there had been planted for a purpose. They were to bring food, drink, life to the people who would enjoy their harvest. I remembered what we learned last week. The vineyard is also a metaphor for us as people. We are planted to bring food, drink, life to one another and so often we only think of ourselves. So often we forget that there are others in need and desiring assistance.

As we made our way out to the vineyard that morning, this thought was fixed firmly in my mind and it transformed my day. No longer was I thinking about how much we had to pay to be there. Instead, I was lost in the idea that for a little bit of time that morning, we could be part of something larger than our own lives. We could leave behind the world of the "zero sum game," and enter a world of abundance where what we harvested could be shared and enjoyed by many.

My plan was to stand side by side with Albert and Francesco and Rochelle, near to the rest of our family and enjoy the family time together, but as we worked, I was gradually separated from the rest of the family. The vines I was picking became empty more quickly than the vines of the others and I moved to a place where picking was more productive.

I was working on one side of a row and there were three women working on the other side. It was impossible for me to ignore their conversation. They were talking about how excited they were for church the next morning. For awhile I unintentionally eavesdropped on their conversation but after awhile I could not hide my curiosity.

I asked through the vines what church they were a member of and they told me. They said they had been without a lead pastor for three years and tomorrow, the new pastor was going to be with them for the very first time. They said the past few years had been difficult but the congregation had stayed together and been faithful in their attendance and at last their wait was over. They talked about how they had formed small groups to encourage one another and about how they had divided up the work of caring for one another.

I admit, the thought crossed my mind...What were the people of our church talking about on that Saturday morning? Were we focused on encouraging one another? Were we looking forward to worship on Sunday morning? Were we thinking of ways we could hold one another accountable?

It occurred to me in that moment that the passage from the evangelist Luke that I shared earlier today was asking those same questions. The passage begins at verse 10, but the first 9 verses of Chapter 13 are necessary for context. They invite a conversation the congregation is having with Jesus, a conversation about faithfulness. The congregation is outraged that Pilate would take the lives of several of the faithful and then mix their blood with the sacrifice.

Jesus responds to their outrage by asking if these martyrs were greater sinners than any others. He then went on to acknowledge an accident that had occurred in which 18 people were killed. He wondered if they were killed because of their sin. He made the point that of course they were not, but also that now is the appropriate time for all of us

to be aware of our sin and repent of it. We do not know what tomorrow brings but we know that we do have now! We must hold one another accountable for the relationships we have with the Lord.

To further illustrate the point, Luke picks up at verse 10. Jesus is teaching at one of the synagogues. It is the Sabbath and it is his custom. In other words, Jesus is exactly where he is expected to be. As he is doing what is expected of him as a rabbi, at once there is a woman who enters.

Luke tells us she has been possessed by a spirit for 18 years and she is quite bent over and unable to stand up straight. Still, he says, she has come to synagogue. She did not know Jesus was going to be there, but she came because she always came. In other words, she also was where she was expected to be.

When Jesus saw her, he called her over. Jesus, the one who was where he was expected to be called the woman who was where she was expected to be and the two of them had a moment. Was it a coincidence?

I am not a believer in coincidence; especially not where the Lord is concerned. I am, however a big believer in faith. Jonathan Cahn tells us in "The Book of Mysteries" that we do not walk by sight. Sight leaves us always looking at the past. We walk by faith, trusting that the next step we take will be the right step.

Walking by faith, the woman who had been suffering for 18 years did what she always did. It did not matter that for 18 years she had been attending synagogue and praying for healing. She knew by faith that if she persevered, she would step into a new reality. On this day, that perseverance paid off.

Because of her faithfulness, she was where she was supposed to be. Because of His faithfulness, He was where He was supposed to be and in faith, Jesus and the woman found each other. Jesus called her over and spoke with her.

He said, "you are free!" What a wonderful expression. You are free from your ailment, your need, your pain, your hunger. The prophet Isaiah said it in the passage we heard this morning. "Take off your yolk." Remove the oppressions of the world and the walking by sight. Walk by faith and be where you are supposed to be and I will be where I am supposed to be; right here beside you and I will set you free.

Set free, the woman did not run off to do all the things she had been unable to do for the past 18 years...NO! Instead she did what those who walk by faith do! She stood up straight! She demonstrated the power God had exercised in her life and she gave God all the praise, all the honor, all the glory. She bore witness to the faithfulness she had, a faithfulness in God alone, and to the faithfulness of a savior fulfilling a promise he had made in Luke 4 where he said he had come to fulfill the message of good news to the sick and the poor and the lame and the weak.

Jesus was right where he was supposed to be, doing exactly what he was supposed to be doing and as a result, this woman who was right where she was supposed to be collided with his purpose in a statement of faith that was and is unmistakable.

Oddly, many have used this passage to claim a warrant for not being in church. They have said, "see, we can be healed anywhere and Jesus says we can even be healed on the Sabbath if we are somewhere else."

I think though that if we examine the fullness of Jesus actions we will find that he is not calling us to attend to the things we might want to be doing and ignore the things we ought to be doing. Instead, he is calling us to a faithfulness through accountability. He meets this woman exactly where she ought to be...exactly where she has been for each Sabbath day fore each of the last 18 years.

When the leader of the synagogue is upset, it is because of the rules of others, not because of the commands of God. God's command remains the same. Keep the Sabbath day holy. Jesus asks, "What can be more Holy than helping a brother or a sister," and he makes the point by reminding the leader and others who might be of like mind that any of them would care for one of their animals if it were bound and in need on the sabbath.

If animals were tied to a place where their health or safety was at issue, any one of the people at synagogue would free them from their bondage (Jesus uses the words, "untie them") and not only that but then lead them to safety and the comfort of exactly what they need.

Here before the people of the synagogue on that morning stands a "Daughter of Abraham," a faithful follower, one who when called to follow God answered with the response of her ancestor. As a result of her faithfulness, she, like Job was afflicted and possessed by something that bound her and even bent her to its will.

Jesus says, "does not one such as her...such as you, deserve to be set free on the sabbath? If you would free an animal, should you not also free one of your own?"

This is the argument for being in church or synagogue and being there regularly. The woman understood her responsibility to God. She stood faithful and continued to be faithful. She honored God on the sabbath and she served only him. She stood bent and broken but unyielding to the power of Satan even in the face of Satan's continued attack on her. She resisted because she believed and she showed up week after week because she believed.

Jesus' point in his conversation with the synagogue leader was that sabbath was about faith and accountability. In his reminder to the congregation that all of us deserve to be set free and what better time than the sabbath to remember it, Jesus is reminding the leader and each of us that we are accountable to God and to one another for the way we treat each other.

I believe if Jesus were attending a worship service in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, he would remind all of us that we need to come, to show up, to be faithful and to hold one another accountable as people of faith. He would remind us that we are to set aside time (sabbath rest) to gather and worship God, not just in our love for him but in the way we show love for one another.

Our accountability is our reason for sharing worship together. Our salvation is assured when we profess Jesus as our savior, however we have a responsibility in our salvation and that is to hold one another accountable. We need to check in with each other to see how we are doing at keeping God's commandments to love. Yes, we can worship God in a field but that is only half of our responsibility. If we are alone, how can we love our neighbor. Both commandments are essential to the deepening relationship we seek with Jesus.

Notice what happens when the woman receives the full measure of love she has been seeking for 18 years. She stands up straight! That is exactly what happens when we receive the full measure of God's love. We stand up straight and we ought to want to share that straightness with others so they can hear our praises and rejoice with us. We come to hold one another accountable and that accountability is measured in our joy. We are set free when we are faithful and where we ought to be.

The women I heard in the vineyard were excited about where they were going to be on Sunday. They were looking forward to being where they ought to be. Faithfully, they had been serving God and neighbor for years. Now, they were excited at the next chapter of their relationship. They were excited together because they had been accountable together.

In Greek, each number is assigned a numerical letter. As you reflect on the message of today, do not look past the number 18. It is used only three times in all of the New Testament. All of them in this chapter of Luke. The numerical value of Jesus is, not coincidentally...18. The 18 who were killed as the tower fell. The 18 years mentioned by Luke as the number of years of faithfulness and the reminder of that number by Jesus Luke is telling us that only in Jesus is our faithfulness fulfilled. He is telling us to seek him, to be where we are supposed to be so that when he calls, we can answer. He tells us to expect him to show up and to act out of the love He has for us. In Jesus is our redemption and we are accountable to Him for our salvation.

We do not know which synagogue Jesus is teaching at today. It is not shared but we do know he is on his way to Jerusalem. He is going there from Capernaum, his home base for his adult ministry. We also know Capernaum is made of two Hebrew words. The first is Kapr, which means village. The second is Nahum. Nahum is a prophet but not from this village. Nahum is also a word which means mercy or healing. Capernaum then is a village of healing.

Even though Jesus is not in Capernaum this morning, we can know he takes this village of healing and mercy with him and shares it wherever he goes. In His mercy we are healed, and saved and in his grace we can stand straight and give praise to God.

John Wesley says to us, "Do as much good as you can for as long as you can." Jesus invites us to hold one another accountable to the good we can do today and forever. We can only do that if we come together on the sabbath and offer each other the freedom from our bondage to the things of this world so we might be free to share God's grace and love as we look to a life of salvation in Him. Amen!