

Healing and the Sabbath: A sermon for Proper 16, Year C

(Isaiah 58:9b-14; Psalm 103:1-8; Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17)

By the Rev. Kyle Matthew Oliver

I am something of a monastery groupie. Maybe that's not the right phrase. But I follow—with great passion, in person and online—a number of monks, nuns, friars, and the orders they belong to.

My adult faith was largely formed among members of the Order of Julian of Norwich. One of my favorite seminary classes was a Thomas Aquinas course taught, mostly, to first-year Dominicans. Every day, I read a meditation by Franciscan spiritual writer Richard Rohr, whom I was fortunate to hear recently in this his last year before retiring from speaking.

And as many of you heard back in Lent, I am a tireless cheerleader for the various online outreach efforts of the Society of St. John the Evangelist in Cambridge, MA (SSJE for short).

Because I work for a highly regarded Christian education professor, I recently had the opportunity to collaborate with some SSJE staff members on the first draft of a curriculum about writing a rule of life. As it turns out, the first order of business in this curriculum was unpacking some baggage around the word *rule*, baggage that has some bearing on our Gospel lesson today.

When many of us hear the word rule, we think of an encumbrance of some sort. A rule holds us back, tells us we can't do something that in fact we'd rather like to do. I think, somewhat bizarrely, of the teacher screaming, "If you don't eat your meat, you can't have any pudding" to a classroom full of singing students in the Pink Floyd movie *The Wall*.

But from Paul Tillich to Paul of Tarsus, the Christian tradition has preached the paradox that rules

actually set us free, that some kind of accountability is necessary for us to become the people that God wants us to be and that *we ourselves* want to be. The rules may not be the fun part of a game, but games wouldn't be fun at all without them. *Life* wouldn't be possible or meaningful without them.

That's the sense in which the monastic tradition uses the term "rule of life." Our rule is that set of intentions and practices that gives shape to our Christian discipleship. Participants in our Pilgrims in Christ class write rules of life, selecting personal guidelines from what they've learned helps bring them closer to God and their neighbors:

"I will go on a silent retreat each year" or "I will keep a journal about my struggles with prayer" or "I will volunteer once a month at Grate Patrol or my local food pantry" or (here's one my spiritual director suggested to me) "I will ask for help."

A rule of life keeps us centered on the spectrum that lies between freedom and responsibility. Without a rule, most of us tend to go a little off the rails—down one extreme or the other. Sometimes our rule will tell us to get in gear. Sometimes it will tell us to take a break. Sometimes, it's hard to know what it's telling us.

I think we're seeing something like this dynamic in the encounter between Jesus and the leader of the synagogue. Their dispute is about two important aspects of observing sabbath, which is part of any good rule of life. [I'm grateful here to Charles Raynal for his Pastoral Perspective in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 3, page 382.]

One idea comes from Exodus 20: "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" (verse 11). That's the perspective the leader of the synagogue has in mind: God made

this day holy, so you should honor that, Jesus. That means resting, not running around healing people!

The other idea comes from Deuteronomy 5: “Remember that you were a *slave in the land of Egypt*, and the Lord your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the sabbath day” (verse 15). That’s what Jesus was thinking of: God longs to set us free. So how could I let this woman be held captive by her affliction?

We will each need both these bits of witness throughout our lives, however we choose to observe a sabbath of some kind: the voice saying “honor this time that God has set aside” and the voice saying “be free to receive God’s gift of healing and rejuvenation.” Sometimes there will be no conflict, other times we will feel forced to choose one or the other.

In this particular case, Jesus lets one of his usual rules of thumb guide his discernment: I came that you might have life, and have it abundantly. I came to proclaim Good News to those in captivity, tidings of peace, of redemption, of release. “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” You are set free from your ailment.

I think it’s no coincidence that Jesus has to weigh in in the direction he does. I think it’s no coincidence that, in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus takes still more opportunities to heal and otherwise lighten the load for the downtrodden on the day he was supposed to be resting.

I think between the loads life puts on our shoulders, and the ones we add of our own design, there’s not a one of us here who doesn’t long to hear these words from our Lord, desperately *need* to hear these words:

You are set free from your ailment—from your perfectionism, your self-hatred, your addictions,

your stubbornness, your anxiety.

Jesus is always ready to say it if we're able to hear. He doesn't promise a life without trouble; he does promise a life in which our troubles are transformed by his abiding presence. If we're ready to be honest with ourselves about it, then Jesus is ready to start redeeming it. In fact, he was already ready, has always been ready, has always been redeeming us.

This process can only happen fully in community, which means our healing and wholeness is tied to that of those around us. That's why we pray and read the Bible and confess our sins and listen for the Spirit together.

That's why Christians have been forming communities in house churches and monasteries and study groups and parishes like St. Paul's K Street for as long as there have been Christians.

That's why tens of thousands of people came to the National Mall yesterday, to renew our country's collective commitment to being honest about the prejudice and greed and fear that prevent us from living the generous and interconnected lives God calls us to. Lives that we know deep down will bring us greater joy and opportunity as we share these gifts with our neighbors.

It's no mean feat to live the lives of grace and peace God desires for us, which is why it helps to have a roadmap, a rule. It takes a commitment to living together, the courage to name the burdens we're carrying, and the humility to lay them down when Jesus offers to make us free of them.

Our Gospel lesson today warns us against presuming there's ever a time when we don't need that gift—and, more importantly, that there's ever a time when he isn't offering it.