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John 5:9-18

13th Message

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## A HEALING THAT CREATES HAVOC

On the head table in the school cafeteria one of the nuns had placed a big bowl of bright red, fresh juicy apples. Beside the bowl she placed a note which read, "Take only one. Remember, God is watching." At the other end of the table was a bowl full of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, still warm from the oven. Beside the bowl was a little note scrawled in a child's handwriting, which read, "Take all you want. God's watching the apples!"

Does God meagerly dole out apples or does he lavish us with cookies? Do we approach God with a negative attitude, thinking about the things we can't do, or do we come to him with a positive attitude, thinking about all that we can do? Our passage from the gospel of John contrasts these two approaches to God.

Last week, we talked about the healing of a paralytic who had been ill for 38 years. The man did not ask for healing. Jesus took the initiative and asked him if he wanted to get well. As we observed, this is an important question for all of us to consider. Jesus told the man to rise, pick up his bed and walk. Remarkably, the man responded, and he was healed.

But this healing was different from other healings by Jesus: it took place on the Sabbath. That caused quite a ruckus and set off a clash between religious systems and the issue of what God is really concerned about. This was what Jesus intended. He deliberately created a hot issue. The rest of chapter 5, which is devoted to this controversy, draws the battle lines between Jesus and the religious authorities. Our text raises questions about pharisaic attitudes, the connection between sin and sickness, and finally, true Sabbath.

**Now it was the Sabbath on that day. So the Jews were saying to the man who was cured, "It is the Sabbath, and it is not permissible for you to carry your pallet." But he answered them, "He who made me well was the one who said to me, 'Pick up your pallet and walk.'" They asked him, "Who is the man who said to you, 'Pick up your pallet and walk?'" But the man who was healed did not know who it was, for Jesus had slipped away while there was a crowd in that place. (John 5:9-13 NASB)**

The gospels record several Sabbath controversies but this is the first mention of Sabbath in John. This was a very serious issue for the Jews, dating from the time when God instituted Sabbath observance in the wilderness. Keeping the Sabbath holy is one of the Ten Commandments. It was the most important bulwark protecting Israel from paganism. Martyrs had shed their blood over Sabbath observance. In the *Mishnah*, the rabbis had identified 39 different classes of work. This included a ban on carrying things from one domain to another, except for acts of compassion like carrying a paralytic. The paralytic man could have been carried into the water. The problem was that, following the healing, he was carrying his bed.

The Jews launched an investigation. It was not Jesus who was charged at first, but the man who was healed, because he was violating the Sabbath by carrying his bed. Under questioning, he incriminates his benefactor, but he does not even know the healer's identity.

As he had done on other occasions, Jesus had slipped away because he was not seeking glory for himself. When the man discovers Jesus' identity, he reports him to the authorities (verse 15). To the paralytic, the fact that Jesus healed him means that he must have authority to tell him what to do on the Sabbath. But in the end he shifts the blame to Jesus.

It's interesting that the authorities are concerned merely about the Sabbath laws, the right order of things, not the miraculous healing. They express no joy, no amazement, no praise for God. The Pharisees were not bad people. They would make great next-door neighbors. They thought they were doing what was right, but their whole focus was on the negative. You can have only one apple...God is watching.

The movie *Chocolat* is the story of a mother and daughter who open up a chocolate shop in a small conservative French village. The village is presented as a place where people behave and do what they are supposed to do. Even though this woman's delicacies seem to have magical healing powers, everyone is suspicious and wary, especially the mayor of the town. He feels that it is his job to keep order. He directs life in the town. He even helps the pastor write his sermons! He is the keeper of the truth. So he marks out the woman as an enemy and seeks to destroy her. On one occasion his self-righteous, pharisaic attitude is captured well when he tells the woman that his ancestors had roused out every radical Huguenot from the village, and that she would pose far less of a problem. She would be out of business by Easter.

Christians can slip into the same attitude at times. Some people think a Christian's main task is to exterminate and eliminate everything bad, rather than dispensing what is good. They join the ranks of church "police," pointing out faults and failures, with the result that the church becomes a place of self-righteous hypocrisy. There is no excitement about what God is doing, no sharing about the healing that is taking place. The atmosphere is one of discouragement, not encouragement. The only things we hear are what we are doing wrong. The church is in trouble when religion is more important than the work of the Spirit.

Last week, the newspaper had a story about an eight-year-old girl who wanted to take communion. She has a rare digestive disorder and cannot eat anything made with wheat. It could result in her death. The tradition of the church she attends is to have some unleavened wheat in the communion wafer, supposedly like the bread served at the Last Supper. The religious authorities did not want to make an exception to this tradition and substitute a rice wafer for the wheat wafer. So the girl has been excluded from taking part in this important sacrament. What's more important? The girl's desire to have a relationship with Jesus or maintaining the church rule?

This doesn't mean that Jesus is unconcerned about sin. In the very next verse he will tell the healed paralytic to stop sinning. He gives

the same admonition to the woman caught in adultery in chapter 8. He revealed the sin of the Samaritan woman at the well in chapter 4 so that she would recognize her need for him. But the first thing Jesus does is offer grace to us, then he tells us to stop sinning. He heals us, and then we get the trash out of our lives. We tend to do things the other way around. First, clean up your life, then you can be healed. But when people come to Jesus they don't know how to behave at first; they don't have it all together.

What is our view of God? Is he a policeman or the source of abundant life? Is he a stingy ogre or does he pour out his grace in our lives? Are we limited to one apple or can we have as many cookies as we like? The way we view God will determine how we live in Christian community. We have to be careful not to derail the work of the Spirit. The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

**Afterward Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, "Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." (5:14)**

In the midst of the investigation, Jesus finds the man in the temple. He tells him to sin no more, or to stop sinning, so that nothing worse may befall him. The man's condition had prohibited him from temple worship, but this is where Jesus finds him. Not only is Jesus concerned about the man continuing in sin, he implies that there is a connection between sin and sickness, between healing and the need for moral reform. This is a loaded statement by Jesus. How are we to understand the connection between sin and sickness?

1. All sickness and bodily decay are the result of sin entering into the world; they are the consequences of a fallen humanity. Sin entered the world and death entered through sin. Eventually our bodies will return to dust.

2. Not all sickness is the direct result of sin. Christians who hold this view cause a lot of damage and needless pain. The notion that sin causes sickness was a common perspective in Jesus' day. In chapter 9, when Jesus and his disciples encounter a man blind from birth, his disciples ask, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?" (John 9:2) Job's three friends believed that Job was cursed because of sin in his life.

People often have the same perspective today. If someone is sick or having a difficult time, some say it must be the result of sin. Last Sunday, we prayed for a couple in Romania whose new baby is very ill with an enzyme deficiency and is not expected to live. Some believers there are saying that because this couple works in a café that serves alcohol they are being punished by God. This young family has been totally rejected by their church community.

This correspondence between sin and sickness just does not hold up. Many people suffer independent of their sin. In chapter 9, we will see that sin does not contribute to a certain man's blindness. Elsewhere in Scripture we find that suffering unjustly and enduring hardship find favor with God and identify us with the wounds of Jesus.

3. Some sickness is the direct result of sin. We face the consequences of our choices and are afflicted in some way. We take illegal drugs and become sick. We engage in immorality and contract AIDS. Sometimes God's people suffer because of sin within the camp, as was the case with Achan's sin which caused the defeat at Ai. Our sin can have devastating results in other people's lives.

Perhaps this is why Jesus picked out this one man at the pool. Maybe his sickness was the result of sin. But even if sin did not

cause his illness in the first place, then clearly future sin will cause something worse, probably the judgment that is talked about later in the chapter.

4. There is a definite connection between healing and forgiveness. Many physical symptoms are the result of a hard heart, resentment or an unwillingness to repent or forgive. This is often the deeper issue. Perhaps Jesus is hinting at this with the man he has healed. If he doesn't accept and offer forgiveness, something worse may befall him. Sickness may be caused by sin, but underneath the sin is the need to be forgiven and to forgive. This is why elders are instructed in James 5 to address the issue of sin and forgiveness when they anoint the sick with oil and pray for them.

So we have to be very careful when it comes to this issue of connecting sin and sickness. There is no checklist that will allow us to figure it out. We cannot make generalizations based on theology. Since we are all sinners we should never make arrogant pronouncements or judge people to be morally inferior. Only the mercy of God keeps us from suffering as a result of our sin. Our attitude should always be one of sorrow and humility, knowing that sin destroys lives and relationships.

And now the issue of the Sabbath.

**The man went away, and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had made him well. For this reason the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because He was doing these things on the Sabbath. But He answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God. (5:15-18)**

When the man points to Jesus as the one who had healed him, the Jews step up the intensity of their pursuit of Jesus. Breaking Sabbath was a serious offense. Even more serious was telling someone to break Sabbath.

Jesus begins his defense by talking about his Father. The Jews respond by accusing Jesus of claiming equality with God, and thereby attack the monotheistic view of the Scriptures. Pagans could obliterate the distinction between deity and humanity, but not Jews. Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar, who made themselves like God, fell under a terrible judgment. So the Jews begin seeking a way to kill Jesus. Their charge is two-fold: breaking Sabbath and making himself equal to God.

The response Jesus makes in verse 17 is unlike the responses he gives in the Synoptics. At the core of what he says is the question of whether God breaks his own Sabbath law. The consensus was that God works on the Sabbath. He holds the universe together. He gives life and judges on the Sabbath; people are born and die. At the end of the first century AD, four rabbis concluded that God does not break Sabbath because the entire universe is his domain and therefore he never carries anything outside of it and never lifts anything to a height greater than his own stature. Jesus is claiming that he is doing the same work as his Father because the universe is his. The same factors that apply to God apply to him.

On the seventh day, God rested. The Sabbath was the climax of creation. However, the seventh day has never come to an end. Even though creation is complete, redemption is still in process, and God continues to work. We enter Sabbath when we rest in Christ by the Spirit. When we enter into Jesus and his rest we are healed. Sabbath

is the day to become well. It is the perfect day to be healed, the day of restoration and peace. This is the day we step into the future: it is today and every day. This is the Sabbath rest for the people of God.

It's good for us to take Sabbath, to cease from our labors and rest. But Sabbath is not just about avoiding labor, it is about entering into the work of the Father. We are not working, but God is working. We are designed to live in Sabbath and not return to sinning. Jesus is saying that he fulfills Sabbath, redefining Sabbath in himself. He is the true Sabbath and he is demonstrating Sabbath by doing what his Father is doing. And when he does this, he upsets the whole Jewish system.

In the wilderness, Israel hardened their hearts and did not enter into Sabbath rest. When we are bound by law, thinking that God is a policeman, we are not living in the Sabbath even if we don't do any work. We are remaining crippled. We are not living in eternal life. The first question is, Do we want to be well? The second question is, Are we resting in Jesus and joining with the Father in the work of redemption? We become well by entering into the Sabbath rest that was fulfilled in Jesus. When we enter into Christ, into Sabbath, we experience sanctified life and we keep the Sabbath holy.

Last week, Grace Rhie shared about a recent trip that she and several others took to Romania to minister to mothers of disabled children. The common opinion is that these women had disabled children because of sin in their lives. So not only do they suffer for their children, they live in isolation and rejection from their community.

Judy Squier also made this trip. Judy, who is disabled, having been born without legs, is part of our congregation. She shared a story with me last week which I want to read. I wish she could be here to share it with us, but she is actually sharing at PBC in Palo Alto this morning.

Attending the conference in Romania was an 18-year-old girl, Noletta, who suffers from cerebral palsy. Her mother didn't realize that the retreat was for mothers only and brought Noletta and her sister. Noletta was very quiet; her sister spoke for her. No one really noticed her, except Judy. And here is Judy's story:

Silent Noletta, always an observer, never a participant, I thought to myself the next day as I saw her expressionless face watching a dozen happy Romanian women making beautiful greeting cards. "Do you want to make one?" I asked as I maneuvered my wheelchair beside her.

"I can't," she replied, glancing at her hands in her lap. Excited to hear her speak, I blurted, "I didn't know you could talk."

Not only did she speak clearly, but in fluent English. All week I had paused while interpreters translated my speeches. In small groups everyone waited while English was translated into Romanian and back again. What a treat to be able to communicate in my language.

"She learned English watching television," her sister spoke up. *Watching television*, I thought to myself. *This girl's brilliant*. I had failed to master a second language after six years in school.

Deciding silent Noletta had untapped potential, I picked up a greeting card on the table in front of her – the one with a vibrant red rose that her sister had artistically decorated. "Would you like to write a letter to your mother?" I asked. She smiled an enthusiastic yes, but declined the green felt pen I

offered, saying, "I can't write." So I played secretary. "What do you want the letter to say?" I asked. After a brief silence, she admitted she didn't know.

"Do you want me to tell you what I would write to my mother?" I asked, knowing that our mothers shared the common experience of having a disabled child. Her big smile provided a clear yes, so I began to dictate. She nodded approval for each line before I wrote it.

My Dear Mom –

I am sorry for all the pain my disability has brought you. I love you very much. When we get to Heaven, I will wait on you and take care of all your needs.

"Is it okay?" I asked. She was pleased with the letter and surprised me by signing her name with amazingly clear penmanship.

"Shhhhh," I whispered, "don't tell your mom about this." Then I asked her if she wanted to read the letter during the sharing time. Her instant yes knit our hearts together as we anticipated this special gift for her mother.

The next day, as I entered the worship center, Noletta was not in her usual spot in the back. I found her sitting on her bike in my spot in the front row. She was eager to read her letter, and more. When our worship leader had overheard our conversation the day before and realized Noletta could speak, she invited her to join her in a duet. "Choose any song you want," Grace had said.

We were both surprised when silent Noletta selected a song written especially for the retreat based on Psalm 139. "That song is five minutes long," said Grace. She couldn't believe her choice. "Are you sure you want to sing that one?" Noletta was sure. As eighty people settled into the room, on cue, Noletta headed to the stage, maneuvering her bike back and forth several times until she was in the middle aisle between the rows of chairs. Grace stood beside her, holding the microphone close to her mouth. Showing only a wee bit of apprehension, Noletta sang like a pro, giving the impression she had rehearsed for weeks, not just minutes.

When the applause quieted, she stayed put – center stage. Reading next the rose-covered card, she spoke with clarity and sincerity. Her words flowed over the heads of the spellbound women to her mother seated in the back. From silent Noletta came the heart's cry of every disabled person:

"I'm sorry. Thank you. Someday I'll make it up to you."

No one moved as Noletta's mom walked down the aisle to join her daughter. We all listened as healing words flowed straight from her heart, forming a bridge across the great chasm of isolation to her daughter: "You have never been a burden to me. You are a gift from God."

As she continued to talk, my emotions drew me into the story. I, a disabled one, born with no legs, remembered the decades of my own mother's pain – her shame when the church implied my disability was a result of her sin; her fears each time I went to surgery; her frustration when she watched life pass me by. Mom and I had hurt side by side but never found each other. I never told her I was sorry, nor did I thank her for doing for me what I couldn't do for myself. Our dialogue of healing never happened.

Noletta's letter, which actually was my letter, uncorked me. I began to sob walrus tears. Half a century of tears that I had refused to cry for fear there was no happy ending. *If only my mom could hear and receive my words*, I thought. *If only my mom could receive God's healing touch*.

Leaving Romania, crawling up and down train steps and plane steps on my stumps and hands, being carried on a host's back the last night when the path to his home was inaccessible to my wheelchair – after a ten-hour transatlantic flight – I asked myself was the mission trip worth it? My heart knew the answer. “We taught the solemn Romanians to smile, they taught us to cry. And cry I did,” I told a friend as I gave her my Romania recap over a cup of coffee.

As I told her how my mom had carried the pain of my disability to the grave, and how I'd wished my mom had received God's touch in Romania, my friend's words stopped me short: “Don't you think your mom has already been healed, Judy?”

Mom healed? Could it be? My mind followed the path. When mom died three years ago, she stepped into Jesus' presence. Jesus wiped away all her tears and healed her of all life's pain.

Suddenly I sensed my mom, like Noletta's, rising from her seat, walking down the aisle to me, her daughter. And in the words of Noletta's mom, I could hear the blessing my mom now bestowed upon me: “Judy, you were never a burden. You were and forever will be a gift from God.”

Noletta wasn't supposed to be at the conference. She broke all the rules. But that was when healing came. That was when God was working to bring redemption and life. That was true Sabbath. Take all the cookies you want. God is watching the apples.

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