

# *The Sabbath Was Made For Freedom*

*(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church, Aug 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022 (Luke 13:10-17 & Isaiah 58:9b-14))*

Remember when the shops stayed closed on Sundays and no sport was played? The streets would be relatively empty unless you were going to church or visiting family. My mother used to tell me about life on the farm on Sundays – the cows were milked, as they wouldn't milk themselves, everyone would go to church in their Sunday best (hats and all) and then return home for a roast lunch. No work was done, no ironing, no work in the fields. Her grandfather would tell the women off if they picked up a knitting needle or embroidery as that was work. The only thing that apparently wasn't work was cooking food – and of course that fell to the women.

The Sabbath, the day of rest was taken very seriously fifty plus years ago in this country. It is still taken seriously by orthodox Jews in parts of Melbourne, they don't even drive to the synagogue they walk.

The Hebrew Bible had laws about the Sabbath, Exodus 20 called the people to remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy and to not work on it. It was to be a day of rest, for the people, rest for the land and for animals. The Sabbath they were called to remember was the first Sabbath which was the seventh day of creation, the day in which the Creator rested from all the creative endeavours, a day of joy, a day of celebration. Down through the ages the rules around what one could and couldn't do on the Sabbath had evolved.

One of the things one could do on the Sabbath was to go to synagogue and teach and that is what we find Jesus doing.

In temple that day we find an older woman who is completely bent over. She had been that way for almost twenty years. Had she come to the temple like that every week for twenty years? Who helped her as she made her way there? She must have been exhausted and in terrible pain. No doubt many judged her, back then one's disability was thought to have been caused by either your or your parent's sin. How many people did she bump into because she just didn't see them? I guess the only people she could have eye contact with were children and adult kneecaps. No one would have greeted her, shaken her hand, looked her in the eye to see how she was, not much dignity. Yet, here she was, doing her best to keep the Sabbath, to come to temple on the holy day.

Yet this day something happened. Someone noticed her. Someone bent down and looked her in the eye and took her hand and helped her straighten up. She hadn't gone looking for healing, no doubt she thought that had passed her by – no one had offered to assist for the last eighteen years. The teacher of the day, overcome with compassion has to do something. Sure, he should have been concentrating on what he was doing, but he could not allow her to continue living like that. Gently he calls her a daughter of Abraham, calls her in such a way that indicates she too is cherished by God. Maybe he was reminding others that they should not judge, rather they should see her as an equal, equally loved by God.

The critics of course, are never far away. Waiting to catch Jesus out, they take the opportunity. No doubt offended by his crack at them about their judgement of this woman. No doubt a bit humiliated by the fact that he acts the first time he meets this woman. when they have left her fend for herself for eighteen years. Spurred on by their ability to follow the letter of the law, they get stuck in. They remind him that there are six other days in the week to cure someone, they remind him that the law requires that one keeps the Sabbath holy. I don't know about you, but I wouldn't have been able to hold my tongue. and would have asked them what they had all been doing for the previous eighteen years.

Jesus is angry though. He calls them hypocrites, reminds them that they would still find water for their livestock even on the Sabbath, that perhaps they picked and chose exactly what they could and couldn't do on the Sabbath based on what their needs were. A bit like my great grandfather who thought knitting was working on the Sabbath, but cooking wasn't.

And the others looking on, the ordinary people were, overjoyed. They were impressed, maybe some wept tears of joy seeing this woman released from her pain. Certainly. they could see the hand of God at work.

Of course, Jesus did break the letter of the law, but I would argue not the spirit of the law. The law called for the people to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. What could be holier than freeing someone from that which had bound them for eighteen years? What could be holier than giving dignity to someone? What could be holier than showing compassion? Is there a better day for freedom than the Sabbath? On the very first Sabbath God rested and celebrated? Surely the healing of this woman was cause for celebration!

As Jesus so often does, he redefines things. He helps us see where our priorities should lie. He helps us see on what side we should err. In the kingdom of God, it is grace, compassion, love, freedom and dignity that override a strict observance to laws. The law of love is far greater than the written laws.

So, friends, let us not make the same mistake as those at the synagogue that day who took issue with Jesus. Let us not think that turning up at church for an hour or so is all we must do to keep the Sabbath, to keep it holy. Remember the sabbath is about relaxation, restoration, release and celebration.

No better a day for freedom!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from a sermon by Rev Sharon Blezzard, in a reflection by the same name.