

## **Luke 13:10-17**

This healing story is unique to Luke. It doesn't appear in any other gospel. The point of the story seems to be to raise the issue of what obedience to God consists of. The leaders of the synagogue are offended that Jesus performed a non-urgent healing on the Sabbath, a day when you're not supposed to work. Jesus counters with the argument that certain works of humaneness have always been allowed on the sabbath, like watering your livestock. The fact is that Judaism always did prioritize humaneness over ritual observance, so this isn't even a fresh new insight from Jesus. I think what it's really raising is, what kind of God are we assuming with our devotional expressions? What do we think God really, really values and appreciates, which we would know because we know what God is like? What is appropriate worship?

There's a constant tension in a life of faith between just following your bliss and holding yourself to some discipline. The conservative Christian critique of progressive theology is that it's simply self-indulgence, putting one's desires and preferences above God's commands. God wants obedience! The progressive critique is that conservative theology is authoritarian and reflects not God's will but cultural sins of sexism, racism, and so forth. God wants liberation! My conservative students often want very much to believe that the Bible must be taken as literally true, one hundred percent, even the part that classifies bats as birds, because they're afraid that if you pull one thread the whole garment will unravel. And as a progressive, I often want to ignore or dismiss passages in the Bible that justify bigotry, like the supersessionism in Hebrews, because I want the Bible to be a force for good in the world but sometimes it isn't.

The tension exists because there's legitimacy to each point of view. I used to be scornful of the temperance movement—Carrie Nation with her ax attacking bars, and the

Women's Christian Temperance Union making Christians seem like they were no fun. Then I learned about the plight of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century whose husbands drank away their wages, who themselves had no legal rights; and I could see the liberationist aspects of the temperance movement. Methodists use grape juice instead of wine for communion out of care for people with addiction disorders, not because of some prudish aversion to pleasure.

There's tremendous value to discipline. If I waited till I felt like it before I exercised, I'd never exercise. I have assigned myself daily exercise, like it or not, because I want the benefits. Presumably the religious leaders in this story want people to have the benefits of rigorous Sabbath observance. Would it be so hard for this bent-over woman to wait until tomorrow for her healing?

It seems like in this story Jesus comes down on the side of liberation. The discipline of Sabbath observance has gotten in the way of the spirit of Sabbath observance which, after all, is supposed to echo God's rest and refreshment on the seventh day of creation. The leaders' fear that people will run amok if the strictness is loosened betrays a certain lack of trust in the spiritual benefits of joy. And that raises the question of whether this framing of discipline versus liberation is even legitimate.

Here's what I mean. Early Christianity often uses the language of bondage to express freedom. In Matthew 11:39 Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." Jesus' "yoke" is paradoxically a relief from burdens. Paul repeatedly calls himself a "slave to Christ," and represents that status as the ultimate freedom. "In this passage, the early church is doing an end run around the whole philosophical opposition between 'freedom' and 'necessity,' and replacing it with a

paradox. She is bound to be loosed. It is necessary for her to be freed.”<sup>i</sup> “There is almost a given-ness to being bound, with the only question of whether one is bound for freedom or bound for bondage.” Paradoxes open up mystery, and I think this framing takes us beyond the rather flat opposition of discipline versus liberation. This paradox suggests that freedom itself is a kind of discipline—and that God invites us into something more spacious than a juggling act between id and superego.

The “One Book” for this year at DMACC is *Somewhere in the Unknown World*, an anthology of first-person stories by refugees who settled in Minnesota.<sup>ii</sup> One story is called “Up Close, It is Different,” by Majra Mucić Gibbons, who came from Bosnia. She was an only child, raised amidst bombings, kept in a darkened apartment for safety and drilled to be ready for every emergency by her only companion, her mother. Her father had joined the army, and this is how it had happened: her father said to her mother and her, “Today the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina came to my workplace to do a draft. I was not drafted but our dear friend was. As you know, he is Catholic. As you know, the army is entirely Muslim. As you know, he would not survive the war in the army as a Catholic man.”

Papa cleared his throat; his large hands now capped his knees. He leaned toward Mama and me and said, “I could not live with myself if I let my best friend die. I have volunteered to go in his place.”

And so he did. Because he was free, but bound by love, he took the place of his best friend who would otherwise die. He crossed boundaries, confused neat categories, a free choice made because he was in bondage to love.

(I will just tell you that Majra’s father survived, and they went to Minnesota where she graduated from Macalester College and went to work for humanitarian relief in Darfur.)

Jesus really could have waited till the sabbath ended to heal the bent-over woman. It wasn't urgent. Maybe he chose to do it right then and there to demonstrate how bondage to love makes you free, even free enough to break good rules. He showed that keeping the Sabbath holy was not primarily a discipline, in the sense of a well-intentioned, good-faith observance of certain rules as a way of spiritual formation. It can be that, but even better is when keeping the Sabbath holy is worshiping God by releasing God's children from bondage and giving them new lives. By healing the bent-over woman *on the Sabbath*, Jesus re-defined Sabbath observance as transmission of God's joyful, life-giving spirit. That's what the rules are supposed to result in; they're not ends in themselves. Appropriate worship is *doing* love.

Perhaps you remember this poem, "God Says Yes To Me" by Kaylin Hough.<sup>iii</sup> I feel like we've read it before. But if you don't, that's okay, because I'm going to read it now.

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic  
and she said yes  
I asked her if it was okay to be short  
and she said it sure is  
I asked her if I could wear nail polish  
or not wear nail polish  
and she said honey  
she calls me that sometimes  
she said you can do just exactly  
what you want to  
Thanks God I said  
And is it even okay if I don't paragraph  
my letters  
Sweetcakes God said  
who knows where she picked that up  
what I'm telling you is  
Yes Yes Yes

Let us pray:

God, we can scarcely believe when you say Yes to us. But we say to you now, O God, Yes, yes. Yes. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2013/08/a-bound-woman-bound-to-be-loosed-from.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Yang, Kao Kalia, *Somewhere in the Unknown World*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020.

<sup>iii</sup> from *[In the Palm of your Hand](#)*, 1995 Tilbury House Publishers. Copyright 1995 by Kaylin Haught