

August 21, 2016

TO KEEP THE DAY HOLY

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Luke 13:10-17

There are three characters in the drama
we just heard from Luke's account of the Gospel.

There is **Jesus**,
who was in the synagogue on the Sabbath
as was his habit.

There is a **crippled woman**,
who has been suffering with her infirmity for 18 years.

There is the **leader of the synagogue**,
a man chosen to oversee the life
of this community of faith,
to ensure that everything
was done decently and in order.

Come with me now into the minds and hearts of these three
in the synagogue on that Sabbath;
Perhaps we can gain a glimpse
into our own minds and hearts
in this sanctuary on this first day of the week.

Jesus had already begun his teaching
when the woman struggles into the synagogue.

“Late again, you would think
that after eighteen years of hobbling
I would know how long it takes me
to drag myself here.

Interesting isn't it
that both Jesus and the synagogue leader
are after the same thing?
They both pursue the glory of the Holy God,
the Holy One of Israel.
Each seeks to reflect the holiness of God
in each's own life.

Sincerity is not enough.
What we are sincere about is equally important.
Jesus would say that the leader of the synagogue
is sincerely wrong.

The conflict is over different understandings
of what it is to be holy ...
different perceptions of the holiness of God.

The root meaning of the Hebrew concept
is to be separate, distinct.

In terms of God it was to say that
God is “totally other.”

It was an otherness that caused the beholder
to be sore afraid ...

that caused Moses to take off his shoes
because he was on holy ground ...
an otherness made manifest
in temple’s “holy of holies.”

The word took on an ethical connotation ...

that began positively but
evolved into a holiness of negation.

The Sabbath was the cornerstone and focal point
of this piety of restraint and abstention.

Give the leader of the synagogue credit ...

he recognized a key characteristic of God.

God is holy and he did not run away in terror.

His was a hard and rigorous holiness
and he stayed the course.

Unlike those of us in our age
who flee the concept of holiness.

Only we flee a warped, disfigured concept.

And in our fleeing embrace an indulgence
which cannot or will not judge
if something is true or false,
useful or destructive,
healthful or diseased.

For a moment then, let us reflect on the holiness of Jesus
and perhaps find a holiness that is appealing and
challenges the finest fibres of humanity.

The New Testament makes no bones about the fact
that Jesus is the incarnation of the Holy God ...

Jesus is the Holy One of God.

But what if the tradition has misread God's holiness?

God IS wholly other ...

distinct, different from humankind

to a degree immeasurable by our highest mathematics.

Jesus portrays a holiness that is distinct

from the day to day human way of goodness.

But the difference is in the paradoxical commitment of God

to be present to humanity and

not run away from its brokenness ...

to approach humanity in grace ...

to redeem humanity ...

to give new life so that people can again

find their true nature as children of God

made in the divine image.

What if God's holiness is God's passion

to save and make whole?

Did not the gospel writer John proclaim that

"God so loved the world, that God sent the only Son ..."?

This is what is described in this vignette from Luke.

God's holiness is revealed in the liberation of this woman

from the crippling effects of the evil one.

Jesus' holiness is not in his negation

but in his embrace of this hurting, oppressed

daughter of Abraham.

The church, you and I,

are called to be a holy people

bearing witness by our lives to the passion of God

for the wholeness of the world

and all its inhabitants.

Richard Selzer is a surgeon,

who is also a pretty fair author.

He tells this story which I think

embodies a passionate holiness.

"I stand by the bed where a young woman lies,

her face post operative,

her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish.

A tiny twig of a facial nerve,

the one to the muscle of her mouth had been severed.

She will be this from now on.

The surgeon had followed with religious fervour
the curve of her flesh;
I promise you that.
Nevertheless, to remove the tumour in her cheek,
I had to cut the little nerve.

Her young husband is in the room.
He stands on the opposite side of the bed,
and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight,
isolated from me, private.

Who are they, I ask myself,
he and this wry mouth I have made,
who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily?

The young woman speaks.
“Will my mouth always be like this?”

“Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve is cut.”

She nods and is silent.
But the young man smiles.
“I like it,” he says. “It is kind of cute.”

All at once I know who he is.
I understand and lower my gaze.
One is not bold in an encounter with a god..

Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth,
and I am so close.
I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers,
to show that her kiss still works.”¹

The church, in the passion of true holiness,
kisses the world, twisting its lips
to accommodate a crooked, needy mouth.

Amen.

¹ Richard Selzer. Quoted by Donald W. McCollough, The Trivialization of God. Colorado Springs. NavPress.