
“Why It Couldn’t Wait”

A SERMON on Luke 13:10-17 for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C
Preached 21 August 2022 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister
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Well, you’re here! I’m here! We’re all here! And on time, right? Praise be to God!

After all, for me, *my* recurring stress dream—you know, that dream that you have time and time again and you wake up all shaky and sweaty and tense from... for me, it always has to do with being late. More specifically, late for Sunday morning worship. And by “late”, I don’t simply mean a minute or two or three late, the sort of delay that Emma could easily cover up with a little extra noodling or improvisation on the piece she was playing for the prelude. No, rather, I mean, like, *really* late. Quarter hours, half-hours, even more...

In my dream, it’s never so simple as mere oversleeping. Instead, it always plays out as some sort of feverish scene in which I realize, right at the last moment, that I don’t have some critical item, requiring some epic journey all the way across town to retrieve. Or I get caught up trying to fix my wireless microphone, or trying to get the printer to spit out my sermon papers. Just one more little jiggle will get it working, right? There’s even been the one where I’m just about to go in, and I realize I have on what I believe to be the wrong robe—as though it was critically important. I run back to my office, and then I can’t get some zipper undone, or I get all tangled in like the microphone wire or something. Finally I get that robe off, and I get all dressed up in whatever the correct thing was supposed to be... and then I realize I forgot to put on the microphone, which (of course) has to go on underneath everything to hide the wire. And so I have to take it all back off again... Meanwhile, it’s going on some like 20 or 25 minutes past when the service was supposed to start and I’m still *there* and you’re all *here* and poor Emma’s probably had to stop and dig out some more music to play.

I know that I’m not the only one who’s had an anxious dream or two about being late. Maybe your dream was about trying to make it to your wedding, or to an important interview. Back when I served a congregation next to a university campus, I knew that some of the entering students got worried about navigating a huge campus and being late for class on the very first day. I tried to offer them a word of grace, letting them know that it wouldn’t have been the end of the world if that happened.

Anyway, whatever the circumstances, I do understand the anxiety. After all, in our society, we *do* give significant weight to things happening at their appropriate time.

That is, of course, all that the synagogue leader in today’s story wanted too, right? For things to happen at their appropriate time. And Jesus working healing miracles on the Sabbath day was *not* the right thing happening at the right time.

The practice of observing a Sabbath day—of taking one whole day and stopping all work, having a day simply of rest and, in some cases, religious observance—had long and deep roots among Jesus’s Jewish community, descendants of the ancient Israelite people. It echoes all the way back into one of the stories our tradition tells to understand the creation of all the world. We

hear in that story—perhaps you remember—how “on the seventh day God finished the work that [God] had done, and ... rested on the seventh day from all the work that [God] had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that [God] had done in creation.”¹ Picking up on the pattern of that day of rest in God’s work creating the world, the Israelite law—their covenant and code of life practices that made them who they were as God’s people—it enshrined observing a Sabbath day in one of the Ten Commandments we find in the Exodus story. “Remember the sabbath day,” that commandment said, “and keep it holy. For six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For 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.”²

“For six days you shall labour and do all your work” the commandment said. That’s what the synagogue leader knew. And even an act of healing, of transformation, of making a woman stand who had been stooped so low that all she often saw was the dust of the earth—this was work, was it not? So this particular synagogue leader thought. It was not the appropriate time. Anyway, couldn’t she come back tomorrow, on one of the *other* days, to get healed?

On April 16th, 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. sat in a jail cell in the city of Birmingham, Alabama. As he sat there, he used the margins of a newspaper to write out a now-famous letter to eight of his colleagues in ministry. You see, earlier that week, these eight white ministers— a Presbyterian minister; a handful of bishops Episcopal, Methodist, and Catholic; and a Reform Jewish rabbi—they had published a letter criticizing the protest efforts in Birmingham, and included a thinly-veiled swipe at Dr. King himself. These eight white clergymen, let it be said, were not radical segregationists or white supremacists. A couple of them had already taken controversial desegregationist stands in their own ministries for which they had already suffered consequences; others would become ardent civil rights advocates in the long-run.

But to these eight on April 12th, 1963, while they could <quote> “recognize the natural impatience of people who feel that their hopes are slow in being realized,” they were <quote> “convinced that these demonstrations are *unwise* and *untimely*.”³ They felt that the pursuit of the civil rights cause should be done in the due course of proper action in the courts, and that, in the meantime, existing rules and rulings should be obeyed. They appealed to all Birmingham residents to <quote> “observe the principles of law and order and common sense.”⁴

Quite simply, in *their* eyes, it just wasn’t the appropriate time yet.

In his famous response now known as the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Dr. King calls out these colleagues in ministry of his, on every account and point they raise: the methods, the

¹ Genesis 2:2-3, NRSV, alt. for non-gendered language.

² Exodus 20:8-11, NRSV.

³ C.C.J. Carpenter, et. al., “A Call for Unity”, letter to the editor, 12 April 1963, Birmingham, Alabama; *The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute*, Stanford University;

http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/popular_requests/frequentdocs/clergy.pdf. Emphasis added.

⁴ *Ibid.*

persons involved, the motivations. “You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham,” Dr. King writes, “But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. ... It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even *more* unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.”⁵

And then, of course, he takes up the central matter of his colleague's complaint, that of being “untimely”. “We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights,” Dr. King writes. “The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter.”

Later in the letter, he admits to them his honest disappointment with these supposedly good souls among the ‘white moderate’. “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion,” he says, “that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; ... who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action’; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a ‘more convenient season.’”⁶

Wait for a more convenient season. There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured. Those always seem to be the refrains, do they not?

We like things in their appropriate time, and we—human as we are—like to be in control of just when we ourselves think that appropriate time will be.

In the case of our scene in the synagogue from today's gospel, it is pretty easy when it comes down to it to make an argument in favour of the synagogue leader's position. After all, if this woman has been bent over for 18 years, what would one more day be? She could come back tomorrow, be healed *then*, and what is a mere 24 hours more?

But you see, when God gets involved, you had better know what time it is. And when God gets involved, you'd better realize that the time is always *now*. Another 24 hours? No, God's time is *now*. Wait a few months? No, God's time is *now*. Maybe things will get better in a few years? No, God's time is *now*. “See, *now* is the acceptable time,” the apostle Paul once wrote; “see, *now* is the day of salvation!”⁷

The problem with the synagogue leader... I don't think it's so much that he was too caught up in the letter of the law to know its spirit. No, I think he was too caught up in his own time to know just *who it was* that was teaching in his synagogue that morning. When Jesus shows up, every time is *now* time. With Jesus around, the day when God brought up the Israelites out of Egypt—that day becomes *now*, today, here, for you. With Jesus around, the day when David

⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail”, 16 April 1963, Birmingham, Alabama; *The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute*, Stanford University; <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/frequentdocs/birmingham.pdf>. Emphasis added.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ 2 Corinthians 6:2

toppled Goliath—that day becomes *now*, today, here, for you. With Jesus around, the day God showed such love as to take on our own death and trample it down—that day is *now*, today, here, for all of us.

The truth is, sisters and brothers, another 24 hours would not do... another 24 hours *will* not do, because eighteen *years* was too darn long—*is* too darn long—in the first place. The day for *you* to claim liberation from whatever is keeping you bent over, that day is *today*, that time is *now*.

Is it an addiction that keeps you looking at the ground? *Today* is the day Jesus wants you to be clean—tomorrow will not do. Is it self-doubt or fear or anxiety that has you bent such that you cannot breathe in the fullness of life? *Now* is the time Jesus wants you to stand up straight, and hold your head up high, and see all the wonders God has surrounded you with. Are you locked up by the oppressive snarl of others because of who you are, or what colour you are, or who you love, or where you're from, or how much money you *don't* have? Well right now the Holy Spirit is here, not just to help you stand, but to make you jump... to make you jump high, and fly, up and up and up until you can grab hold... grab hold of that great moral arc of the universe, long though it may be, and help it bend ever faster, ever faster, faster toward mercy, faster toward justice, faster toward God's future.

There is no need, my friends, to be caught up in anxious dreams any longer... no need to fear that God is off in some distant place and some distant time. Today *is* the day... say that with me: *Today is the day*. Now is the time... *Now is the time*. Praise God... Alleluia... and amen!