25 August 2019
Shepherdstown Presbyterian

Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Repairing the Breach

The catholic theologian Richard Rohr believes the first gaze people train on anything is utilitarian: what's in it for me? What can I get out of it? And perhaps most importantly: how does it make me look? If you don't recognize the narrowness of that gaze, Rohr says, it will lock you into the center of a tiny, tiny world.

Maybe that's the gaze I'm training on the gospel passage for today. It seems so plain: Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, a crippled woman comes in, he sets her free, and the representative of institutional religion scolds him for working on the sabbath.

What's in that story for me? The whole circumstance seems obsolete. If sabbath observance means anything to most of us, it means that one day a week we don't have to do the work that pays our bills. We're free to do whatever we want, including different work to make a little side cash we can spend on jeans or yoga. "Doesn't each of you untie his ox or donkey from the manger and lead it away to give it water on the sabbath?" Jesus asks. Of course we do: we fit the law into our lives. We always have. I can see how someone governed by archaic notions of exact observance might be liberated by this story, but what's in it for me?

The lectionary passage from Isaiah responds to that question in a couple of different ways. Here's the straightforward response: "If you refrain from trampling the sabbath, Isaiah says, if you call the sabbath a delight and honor it, not going your own ways or serving your own interests, then the Lord will make you ride upon the highest places of the earth." The leader of the synagogue believes that, and I suspect that most of us do too, or at least we want to believe it. Is that why we're here?

Many of you will remember Eric Liddell, the Flying Scottsman in the movie "Chariots of Fire" who postpones his return to missionary work in China so he can run in the Olympic Games. Liddell's sister thinks it's frivolous to value running over a religious call. "I believe God made me for a purpose," he reassures her, "but he also made me fast, and when I run I feel his pleasure."

Well, maybe.

The question of right relationship with God comes to a head when Liddell learns that the qualifying heats of the hundred meters, his special event, are scheduled to be run on Sunday, and Liddell's religious call involves sabbath observance more rigorous than most of us could tolerate. So archaic notions about abstinence come head to head with a shot at olympic glory — at which point the vast majority of football-watching Presbyterians would be like, the sabbath was made for people, man, not people for the sabbath. Run the race! We fit the law into our life. Liddell chooses not to run. Instead he goes to church and delivers a sermon on a passage from the book of Isaiah, and the worldly glory seeker in me feels a twinge of loss: set aside by righteousness again!

But the story takes an unexpected turn when a teammate who has already won a medal in another event offers Liddell his spot in the final of the 400 meters. And everyone's like oh come on: he's a sprinter. He's trained his whole life to spend all his strength in a hundred meters. He doesn't stand a chance in the quarter-mile. Everyone but the American quarter-miler, who apparently admires Liddell's convictions. At race time, he hands Liddell a quote from first Samuel: "Him that honors me I will honor." Which means of course that Liddell's going to win. And he does.

That movie won Academy Awards for best picture and best original screenplay because we yearn for the world it describes: follow the rules,

even when it's hard to do so, and you win. And I'm like: Yes! Yes! Thank God that's the world! Follow the rules of sabbath observance and the Lord will make you ride upon the highest places of the earth! Amen!

But Jesus shakes his head. You're training the utilitarian gaze on the sabbath, he tells the leader of the synagogue, and on relationships with God. Until you see the narrowness of honoring the law in every jot and tittle, so that the Lord might make you ride upon the highest places of the earth, you'll be stuck inside the narrow center of a tiny world.

Isaiah's other response will never win an Oscar. "If you break the yoke and the pointing finger," Isaiah says, "if you tape the evil tongue to the roof of its mouth, then your light will rise in darkness, and the Lord will strengthen your bones."

That seems different.

"If you offer your food to the hungry — your substance to the hungry — and satisfy the needs of the afflicted," this Isaiah says, "your ancient ruins will be rebuilt, and you'll be known as the repairer of the breach."

Do you perceive a breach that needs to be repaired?

For Isaiah the breach is a hole in the stone wall around Jerusalem. The Babylonians made it with battering rams, and then they carried away the Jewish upper crust into captivity, again. So much for that chosen-ness idea. What's the breach for Jesus? Is it preoccupation with trivia? Our yearning for a god who makes us ride upon the highest places of the earth?

Shakespeare seems to ennoble Isaiah's kind of breach in his play Henry V. "Once more unto the breach!" Henry clamors to his friends, and we few, we happy few, we band of brothers thunder through the hole that we have opened against all odds, by the grace of God, in the wall protecting Agincourt's idea of itself. And when those haughty Frenchmen finally surrender both their city and their vision of the world, the leader of the synagogue orders us to sing a hymn while marching into their idea: Non nobis, Domine, Domine; non nobis, Domine; sed nomine, sed nomine tuo dat gloriam. Not to us, oh Lord, but to your name it gives the glory.

Singing praises to a glory-seeking god will keep me planted in the middle of that first utilitarian gaze, where breaches are created, not repaired.

I wonder what the breach looks like for each of you.

For me it looks like anger at the wrongness of the world: why is it like this? Millions of Americans admire narcissistic self-promotion; most people would rather pay off their mortgage than donate money to a homeless shelter; he richest country ever to exist refuses to acknowledge that its wealth derives from slavery. But eventually I realize that righteous anger is the pointing finger which Isaiah says I have to break: I point at all those things to keep from looking at the breaches in myself — I failed my children, I deceived my wife, I let my mother die alone. And in spite of all the evidence, something in me still believes that I can do it right, and God will make me ride upon the highest places of the earth.

Ironically, I'm beginning to believe, the breach in me is caused by entrenchment behind the wall of my own rightness, which relegates me to the world of battering rams. The alternative to living in that world is giving up what Richard Rohr calls my personal salvation project, that is, my way of confirming that I'm right. Whatever that is, Rohr says, that's what I have to give up: my way of proving that I'm better than other people.

I don't want to do that.

The writer Elizabeth Ehrlich describes a change of life that resembles mine: both of us came of age in the culture of self-creation, where religious practice is an attribute that we might add to our identity, another one of many. We both became fully self-actualized people, living good lives, and after many years of living in that self-made goodness, both of us found ourselves lying in bed at the end of a good day, wondering why the prospect of another one just like it was so hard to face.

Ehrlich was married to a man whose mother kept a kosher kitchen, and eating with that woman, cooking with that woman, who chose to live the letter of the Jewish law as if there were no other choice, even as she was surrounded by people living happily in other choices, began to change how Ehrlich thought about herself. Maybe she was not supposed to be the project of her life.

When her own children began to enjoy the culture of self-construction, Ehrlich decided to embrace traditional Jewish Sabbath practice, which

requires people to stop constructing the world in which they want to live and spend a day encountering the world which God has already constructed. That's really hard to do. It's so difficult to do in principle that Jewish tradition provides instructions for doing it in practice: don't do any work, or anything that resembles work — neither you, nor your servant, nor your donkey, nor your ox, nor the stranger in your town. Don't clean, don't cook, don't ride your horse, don't drive, not because you need a break, but because you need to remember that you started out as slaves in Egypt, and the Lord redeemed you. In other words, you didn't make yourself, and you can't construct the world.

How much of that discipline could her family embrace, Ehrlich wondered, and how much of it was worth embracing? Could she take her children out of soccer leagues, because they played on Saturdays, the Jewish sabbath? Yes. Could she do the menu-planning Wednesday and the grocery shopping Thursday night? Yes. Could she clean the house on Friday morning and then come home early Friday afternoon to make the sabbath dinner and the next day's cold lunch? Yes. And could she turn the oven off and set the table and trim the candle wicks and be ready to face herself in the mirror of herself before the sun went down?

"Do I observe the sabbath or actually bring it into being?" she asked. "Does sabbath observance create a reality or embrace an eternal truth?"

In the midst of all those questions, Ehrlich moved her family forward. She sent her daughter to Hebrew school so she could learn to sing Birkhat ha-Mazon, the after-dinner grace that sealed and sanctified the meal. By the age of seven, she knew it by heart. "We had a year of candlelit Friday nights at home," Ehrlich recalls, "sealed and sanctified by that ancient song, and then a second year, and then a third."

And the sense of blessing seeped into her every day. Her Fridays grew shorter, as the work of making sabbath pressed against the rest of modern life, but as the habit of making sabbath replaced the habit of making self, she felt the world expand. "Unless you quit your personal salvation project," Richard Rohr says, "your love will be limited to people like yourself." And to gods who are what you want them to be.

Ehrlich's daughter turned nine, and then ten. And then one hectic Friday, she just couldn't get it done. She just couldn't make the sabbath happen.

I understand that. As a seminary student who works full time and also tries to keep his marriage rich and full, I know how hard it is to get all that stuff done. It's too much for most of us. So when Ehrlich took her family out for dinner on that Friday night when she couldn't get out done, I sympathized, while staying home finishing my sermon. Relax, I told her. Enjoy the pad Thai, and the chow fun, and the Chinese beer. Sit back and watch the night fall through the window, the sabbath night. There are

other families to trim the wicks and light the candles. May the sabbath be a blessing in their lives.

"Then we heard singing form the next booth over," she recalls. "My daughter froze: Birkhat ha-Mazon, the after-dinner grace that seals the sabbath, a young man singing to his brother and his father, who had set their chopsticks down." And the blessing of the world they didn't make enveloped them again.

Maybe the breach is whatever perpetuates my yearning for a world in which the blessing can be earned, a world in which it's possible to make myself the kind of person God would have me be, a world made by a God who only likes a certain kind of person, the kind I'm trying to become. Perhaps repairing the breach is moving from the world that I can make into a world that's made already, a world that's waiting to embrace me. May we find our sabbath in that world today.

Amen