

In the gospel reading this morning, we are told of a woman lame, in some way, for many, many years. Jesus healed her, and the woman was joyful and gave thanks to God. There are no surprises here. Healing folks was something that Jesus did, and the woman's response is certainly that which we would hope it to be and also something that we would expect. Where the surprise comes in is with the response of the synagogue leader. He was critical of Jesus for doing a good thing.

What is surprising to us was not necessarily surprising among the orthodox Jews of our Lord's day. In Judaism, the sanctity of the Sabbath is a given, as it has been traditionally in Christianity. Society and the role of religion in at least western society are in flux, and the blue laws of just a few years back are largely gone. Increasingly, people are expected to work on Sunday, and not just those engaged in essential jobs such as power production or medicine. So we have to set ourselves to understanding the traditional approach to the Sabbath, whether it be the Jewish Sabbath or the Christian. Its sanctity was safeguarded by nothing less than the fourth of the Ten Commandments – written in stone for us, lest we forget. By the time of our Lord's earthly years, the rabbis and priests had defined the requirements of Sabbath protection in great detail. For a twenty-four hour period, from sunset Friday sundown Saturday, work was absolutely prohibited, at least those things considered work by the religious authorities, who could tell you that you could lift your donkey out of a ditch, or lead the animal to water, without penalty, but lighting a fire for cooking was prohibited. Penalties for violating the no-work requirement were severe. Jesus challenged this, by healing a woman on the Sabbath, something clearly defined as "work," and since her condition was not life-threatening, what he did was a violation of religious law. To his critics, Jesus showed scorn. "What's with you guys?" he might have said. "Where are your values? Do you think God cares more about protecting his holy day than he does about the health of a human being?" To be a daughter of Abraham is to be a child of God, and God cares infinitely more about the well being of us, his children, than he does about religious rules. As Jesus said elsewhere, God created the Sabbath for humanity, not the other way around.

What does that say to us today? Quite a bit, I think, and it doesn't just pertain to whether it is godly to participate in or play sports on Sunday or perhaps drink a beer or go fishing. What it says is that we should be about the true ethic of our religion with is the ethic of love. Jesus meant it when he said that we are to love God with all our being and love our neighbor not only as we love ourselves but as Jesus loves us. The exercise of that love, towards God and neighbor, is and must always be the core Christian value. So this gives us the basis of not only our Christian law but tells us how we are to do our ethics. To borrow from the approach to ethics known as "Situation Ethics," in any given situation do the loving thing. Or, if you like, in any given situation do what you honestly believe Jesus would do, which would be the loving thing. Situation Ethics is soundly trashed by Christian fundamentalists, but it happens to be soundly based on the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And, while it flies in the face of fundamentalists of any religion, there comes a time, in reality more frequently than we think, when you have to ask yourself if the religious rule is getting in the way of what God truly wants in a given situation. By extension, you have to ask yourself, from time to time, if whether our religious "rules," based on the "sure foundation of Holy Scripture," can stand the test of the continuing revelation of God's grace and the prompting of the Holy Spirit, sound science and evolving social understanding? The Church can and must change the rules when God leads it to a fuller understanding. God's revelation of his holy will did not end at the close of the biblical age. The classic example of this is the biblical support for the institution of slavery, but I think that we have to look also at how we treat

race, gender, social standing and sexual orientation, to name just a few things. You get nowhere in Christian ethics by being inflexible and tying your rigidity to the Bible. That didn't cut it with Jesus and we can not let it cut it with us.

It seems to me that this is what the gospel, today, is all about. "You hypocrites!" Jesus said. "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?" If we would follow Jesus, the message is clear. Do as he did. Do the right thing, which is the loving thing, and in determining the loving thing, a good way is to ask yourself what you think Jesus would have done. *Amen.*