

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on August 22, 2010 (Proper 16, Year C)

“Stickin’ it to The Man.” That’s what Jesus is doing this morning. Telling the powers that be that he’s sick and tired of their rules and he’s not gonna take it anymore. ‘You can’t tell *me* I can’t heal on the Sabbath.’ And the crowd goes wild! They love this rebel *with* a cause. Perhaps this scene even puts *us* in touch with any latent anti-authority feelings we might still be harboring from the 60’s or at least from high school.

But before we get too excited and stage a sit-in – not that I’ve ever heard of *that* ever happening in a church – let’s take a more measured look at this encounter. Jesus is teaching in the local synagogue, as he was wont to do, when he notices the entrance of a crippled, hunched over woman who, we’re told, has been suffering for 18 long years. Jesus calls her over, heals her affliction, and sets off a firestorm of protest. It wouldn’t have been that big a deal – well as much as healing someone can be a minor occurrence – except for one problem: it was the Sabbath day. And according to the Law of Moses, work of any kind – which evidently included healing – was unlawful.

The leader of the synagogue – ie. The Man – objects; thus setting up a legal debate over what was and was not allowed on the Sabbath. A showdown that must have delighted the assembled crowd ensues. But before we condemn him for his insensitivity it should be noted that the leader of the synagogue *was* rendering a faithful reading of the Torah: the seventh day of the week was set aside by God for rest and work was forbidden on the Sabbath. Jesus isn’t arguing *against* Sabbath day restrictions; rather he is arguing *for* healing on the Sabbath. And that’s an important distinction. He argues that because the Sabbath is set aside for God, what better day to highlight God’s compassion and demonstrate the healing power of faith? And through the healing of this woman he offers a tangible sign – *on a day set aside for God* – of God’s ability to impact those most visibly in need of healing.

By the end of the story we hear of the great rejoicing of the crowds who support Jesus’ position and the humiliation of his opponents. Which is why it leaves us feeling as if Jesus was sticking it to The Man. He’s not, of course. His goal is to spread the good news of freedom and forgiveness and salvation. He may tweak the establishment along the way but so does anyone who offers significant transformation in the face of long-standing tradition.

And, again, Jesus is in no way diminishing the importance of keeping the Sabbath or of Sabbath time in general. These are two distinct yet intertwined concepts. The idea of keeping a day for the Lord is an ancient practice – indeed it’s one of the 10 Commandments handed down from God by Moses. It was made a commandment because it is critical to our spiritual lives to take the time to worship the God in whom we live and move and have our being. And because, presumably, people struggled with the concept even then. It’s hard to think about devoting a day to the Lord when there are mouths to feed and crops to sow and cattle to corral. Or in our case, jobs to do that don’t fit neatly into the Monday through Friday, 9 to 5 routine. Or out-of-town guests to host or games to watch or a rare lazy morning in bed to enjoy. Our culture has even

made the Sabbath as convenient as possible – squeezing it down to one hour on a Sunday morning.

And then there's the other meaning of Sabbath that refers to time away from the daily routine. I've read numerous articles this summer that speak of the inability of many Americans to truly take Sabbath time; articles that boldly proclaim the death of the American vacation. You may physically be at the Grand Canyon or on the Cape or wherever but unless you fully unplug, it's not the true Sabbath that our souls so crave. On beaches and lakes and faraway cabins a cell phone rings, an i-Phone buzzes, a laptop beeps and a Sabbath is, once again, rudely interrupted. Some of this we bring on ourselves but the reality is that we – and our families – all need time to recharge and renew mentally, spiritually, emotionally, and physically. When we don't, we start to run on fumes; and that is an unsustainable way of being.

While technology doesn't help, I think much of this attitude is rooted in hubris. In the grand scheme of things none of us are as important as we'd like to believe. Life goes on with or without our presence. And this all points to perhaps the greatest sin: playing God. It's usually not conscious but when we seek to control every aspect of our lives we're doing just that. Many of us struggle with taking vacation time because we believe that we are indispensable.

And I'm as guilty as anyone: I was technically supposed to be off this past week. Yet I had a sermon to write and a wedding to perform and a couple to counsel and the list goes on and on. I have trouble disengaging from work; and e-mail, my BlackBerry, pastoral emergencies, personality, and physical proximity to the church make it difficult to get away mentally and emotionally. In a word, I'm not great at taking Sabbath time. And I know I'm not alone. So this is partly a confession and partly a pledge to do better in the years ahead. I generally do like to practice what I preach.

In my defense I did take the boys down to Sandwich on the Cape this week. We went to the Glass Museum, ate ice cream, and played mini-golf. And wouldn't you know it? Amid the windmills and water obstacles were signs with the verses of the 23rd Psalm. As someone said to me "Only *you* would stumble upon a Christian miniature-golf course." And, yes, at the end of the course there was a big red cross. But around the 9th hole I read "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want." A few holes later was the kicker: "He restores my soul." Restoring the soul is ultimately what Sabbath time is all about.

Yet how often do we go around hunched over, crippled by the weight of the world? Stressed out with our insides teeming with anxiety? That's not an emotional posture worthy of encountering the fullness of Jesus Christ. But the good news is that like the woman in this passage, Jesus bids us to draw near to him and be made spiritually whole. He seeks us out, hoping to lift us to the rich life of fulfillment and meaning that he intends for each one of us. Allow him to do so. Allow Jesus to take your hand and lift you up body, mind, and spirit to the new perspective of life and faith and fruitfulness that awaits those who abide in him and walk with him and serve him. Even if it means taking some time away to do so.