

Dunbarton Congregational Church
Sunday, August 26, 2007
9:30 a.m.

“Second Life”
Luke 13:10-17

“¹Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath . . .” writes Luke in our scripture reading this morning. Like any law-abiding Jew, Jesus kept Shabbat in a house of worship. Imagine with me this synagogue. It is made of stone, with a ritual bath on the premises and some kind of communal dining area. The sanctuary itself is a large room supported in the center by a series of columns. Stone benches hug the walls. At one end there is a raised podium from which the scriptures are read. Nearby is a special chest for storing these sacred scrolls. In the center of the room is a seat of honor where any learned man respected by the community could sit and teach.

The synagogue today is crowded and buzzing! Men and women fill the sanctuary. They have come to hear Jesus of Nazareth after all! He is seated in the center, offering commentary on the reading for the day. As he speaks to the crowd, his eyes are drawn to a woman huddled against one of the walls. She is bent and crippled, her bones so frozen over she must listen with her head bowed low. How could Jesus not pause at the sight of her suffering? How could his heart not be moved by her shame, the community’s presumption that her illness is a sign of God’s disfavor?

The woman does not ask to be cured—no one asks on her behalf. Jesus just sees her as only Jesus can and motions for her to come forward. “Woman,” he says, you are set free from your ailment.” Then he lays his healing hands upon her and immediately, one of those favorite Bible words—*immediately*—her stooped body unfurls and she stands up straight, meeting her Savior eye to eye. And what is the first thing she does? She praises God! You see, she knows from whence her healing comes.

There must have been a collective gasp in that synagogue, don’t you think, a surge of muttering, “Oh no, not another Sabbath violation!” The leader of the synagogue is indignant. He squares off with Jesus, addressing his

remarks to the crowd: “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on *those* days and be cured, not on the Sabbath day.” But Jesus retorts: “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?” No one makes a sound. Then the crowd erupts, all his opponents are put to shame while everyone rejoices at the wonderful things Jesus is doing!

Rules. It’s always about rules, isn’t it? Which ones to follow and which to ignore, which to bend and which to uphold, which are worthy and which are corrupt, which are sacred and which are profane. In our story today, Jesus has no objection to rules per se; indeed, his response to the synagogue’s leaders is a legal masterpiece. He knows that while the tying and loosing of knots is expressly forbidden in the Mishnah or law, it is *also* written that domestic animals can be untied on the Sabbath for the purpose of watering them. So which law is correct, that’s the point.

Jesus “unties” or “sets free” a crippled woman—the word in Greek means the same thing—so that she might be filled with *living* water. No wonder the crowd in that synagogue is rejoicing—*scrupulosity* (isn’t that a great word?) has been bested by righteousness yet again. Jesus affirms that lovingkindness supersedes legalism. Can’t you picture it—the worshippers rising from their bench seats in a wave—“Go Jesus!”

I don’t know if it’s me, but life today seems oversaturated with rules. We have rules for everything—what time to go to work, what time to leave, how long to take for lunch and vacation and how many days we are allowed to get sick. We take these man-made rules for granted; they are a legacy from our industrial past, our “people are cogs in the wheel” mentality. Yet centuries of farmers and artists, and twenty-first century high tech entrepreneurs would find these conventions curious and quaint.

If we want to keep our children safe, we make rules. If tragedy strikes, we make rules. If we feel threatened, we make rules. If another country threatens us, we *really* make rules. Our children spend all their free time playing sports, each with a prescribed set of rules. Schools are spilling over

with rules, parents are spilling over with rules, the government is spilling over with rules, our economic systems are spilling over with rules.

If you stop to think about it, for the freest country on earth, *and we are*, the amount of personal freedom we actually get in any given day is pretty slim. *We spend our years doing life by the book until just like those Pharisees “the book” becomes the very point of our lives.* No wonder we ache for retirement, when we get to be farmers and artists and entrepreneurs once again.

My friends, are we really so different from that crippled woman? Bent by the weight of life’s rules and expectations we trod along, our gazes fixed intently on the paths at our feet. Don’t you at some level long to cast off this burden, to be untied, set free, to stand up straight, stretch every stressed inch of your body, breath fully, look Jesus right in the eye and shout, “Praise God!”

Someone of a younger generation told me last spring that everyone should have an avatar. An avatar, in case you don’t know it, is an internet game identity, a handcrafted-self, designed from the bottom up one keystroke at a time. To orient me to this marvel, this same person guided me to the Internet game “Second Life,” a virtual world in which virtual people explore their surroundings, meet other virtual people, socialize, participate in activities, and forge relationships.

While I highly doubt that *Second Life’s* creator, Linden Labs is a Christian-based organization, there is something Kingdom-like about the concept. Imagine a world in which the point of life is to live it, to fill the rhythm of days with a measure of serendipity, to release ourselves to the reality that *God* is in control, not us. Imagine a world in which we not only *notice* the crippled people in our lives, we break out of our rule-driven routines long enough to offer a healing word.

While *Second Life* is sometimes referred to as a game, this description is disputed. It does not have points, scores, winners or losers, levels, an end-strategy, or any other rules. It is simply a semi-structured virtual environment where life’s journey unfolds one interpersonal encounter at a time.

1Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him." 3In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Second Life, Third Life, Fourth . . . In God's realm, we get all the tries we need. Just remember my friends, that you only get *one* life. What a shame to waste it on the wrong rules.

Amen.