

Jeremiah 17:19-27
"No Burden Here"

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I hope you won't mind if I take a few minutes to talk about what could happen here today. By now we are all aware of what has gone on here and of what usually goes on here.

I actually like the fact that you can come to church every week and find that they haven't picked the place up and moved it. I like that you can walk in and see many of the same faces that were here last week and the week before that and the week before that. For me, having a favorite place to sit and favorite hymns to sing in church is a bit like riding on a carousel. Though the world is spinning furiously by you, somehow you're able to stay in the same place. And I like that every week, no matter how long Monday through Friday may feel, eventually Sunday does come back around. The door is always open, the table is always set, and the Word of the Lord always delivers. There is a side to Sundays that is constant, that should always be predictable. I like that.

But if we read the Bible, we know there is also a side to Sundays that isn't constant and predictable, a side that has nothing to do with what should happen and everything to do with what *could* happen. And it's this side that I'd like to look at together for a moment. When scripture speaks about today and what goes on in church, it doesn't speak of Sunday of course, or of church. For back in Bible times, there was no concept of Sunday or of church, at least not as we've come to know them. At best, a day like today was understood to be a Sabbath, meaning rest. Every seven days people would get up and tell themselves, today I'm going to rest. Today I'm going to put off today what can be done tomorrow. I'm not going to go into the office. I'm going to believe that the world will not fall down without me contributing to it for 24 hours. But then those same people would look at the dishes piling up in the sink and the paint peeling off the walls and they'd think, if I'm going to rest today I'm going to need to get out of the house and go get me some help. And so people went to the temple, they sat with other people who were also trying hard to rest, they listened to the priest read from the prophets: "Thus says the Lord: For the sake of your lives, take care that you do not bear a burden on the sabbath day or do anything that puts a burden on anyone else." And the people rested.

If only it were that easy. I think you and I both know, though, that it's not. You remember the story of the invalid man in John's gospel. One of the Bible's most pitiful characters I think. His story goes that for 38 years he did nothing but sit by a pool in Jerusalem that was believed to have magical healing powers. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, there he sat right on the edge of healing. Until one sabbath day Jesus stops by and asks him, "Do you want to be made well?"

The man replies, "Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way in, someone else cuts in ahead of me."

For 38 years this man sat licking his wounds, noting every person who came by but never stopped. What else could he do? He could stand up, take his mat, and walk, which is precisely what Jesus tells him to do.

A little later in the day he is walking through the temple now carrying his mat when a group of Jews see him and scold him. "It's the sabbath. It's against the law to carry your mat today. Who told you that you could carry your mat today?" The man doesn't know, for Jesus never told him who he was, only, take up your mat and walk.

It's hard to figure out what's going on in this scene. John doesn't give us any details as to how Jesus made the man walk again. Did Jesus rub any ointment on the man's legs to loosen them up? Did he lay his own hands on them, while chanting abracadabra? All we're told is that Jesus literally tells a man who hasn't moved from the ground in 38 years to get up and walk, and the man does. Hard to imagine. Makes me wonder if the man could have walked that whole time but he gave himself no reason to. Then along comes Jesus, who doesn't so much make the man walk again as he makes the man *want to walk again*.

But how did he do it? How did Jesus get the invalid to walk again? It's necessary to know that Jesus runs into the man again later on that same Sabbath day. This time, when he sees the man, Jesus tells him, "See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore."

"Do not sin anymore." You see? It used to be that if one was an invalid for 38 years it had to be that you or your parents had committed some grave sin and God was punishing you for it. So for 38 years this man has sat oppressed not only by the burden of his broken legs but also by the burden of thinking he was God's whipping boy. But Jesus doesn't believe this, not about the man or about God. He tells him, "Get up and walk." He tells him,

you are not who everyone says you are. You are more than your handicap, more than your poverty, more than your past, more than your burdens. You are free and you are loved.

That's not always easy to believe in, though, is it? It's even harder to live into. Because there are all kinds of reasons for why people won't lay their burdens down. Like the invalid of John's gospel some have no place to put their burdens, no one to help them into the pool. Others simply don't trust themselves enough to let their burdens go. Who would they be and what would they do without them?

There's a story about a woman who went to see her doctor because she was experiencing these intense headaches that seemed to run down the back of her neck and all the way to her toes. When her doctor asked her if she had them all the time or if they came and went, she said she had them all day long but not at night when she was sleeping. So the doctor asked her what she was doing all day long. The woman ran down a list of all the organizations she volunteered with and then went on to describe all her children and grandchildren and what she gave to each one, from free babysitting to free advice. The doctor suggested the woman might just slow down a bit, drop a few things from her schedule, but the woman said, "Oh no. What would any of us do then?" Finally, she asked her doctor if he knew what might be causing her headaches and pain, to which her doctor simply said, "I do. I think you need to loosen your halo."

I don't tell us this story to make us feel like all our efforts to help and heal the world are for nothing. Not at all. But if you're one of the more than half-a-million people living in Texas today after Hurricane Harvey, or you're one of the 2,000 refugees who were forced to leave your home in Myanmar this morning, or you're one of the 2,000 more who will be forced to leave tomorrow, then "Get up, take your mat, and walk" probably isn't going to cut it for you. Sadly, we know that in the wake of natural disasters and civil wars, no amount of good programming or giving on our part ever feels like enough.

This is what's always gotten me about the Sabbath and about what Jeremiah says: *"For the sake of your lives, take care that you do not bear a burden on the sabbath day or bring it in here. And do not carry a burden out of your houses on the sabbath day or do any work, but keep the sabbath day holy, as I commanded your ancestors."*

I guess Jeremiah wasn't living in Houston or Myanmar or walking around in your shoes. Doesn't he know we can't just lay our burdens down and get up and walk?

In a few weeks we're going to start holding Youth Group here at the church on Sunday evenings. It will be a time for middle and high school students to get together, and I'm sure there will be plenty of junk food, silliness, and holy mischief to go around. But I'll be there, and some of you will be there too, because it will also be a time to ask serious questions about God and growing up and growing up with with God in our world, and I'm excited to hear what our students have to say and to see what they'll do. And this past week, while thinking about all of this, I came across the following words about youth and why there's just not a lot of them in our churches anymore:

“What if [our] disappointing track record with young people has not been primarily a failure of models, educational strategies, historical cycles, or institutional support, but a failure of theology? Is it possible that the “problem” facing [the church when it comes to youth ministry today is that we have no passion? That would be ironic. Most young people come to us brimming with passion. Could it be that, instead of fanning this youthful zeal into holy fire, we have more often doused it, dismissed it, or drowned it in committee meetings? The theological challenge youth pose to the church is blunt: are we who we say we are? Do we practice passion, transformed by a Love who never disappoints...or are we just another sagging social convention, like Dracula, that needs young blood to survive? The future of the church does not depend on youth but only on Jesus Christ. The task of young people is not reorganization of the church but listening to God's Word; the church's task is not the conquest of young people, but the teaching of the Gospel. The only place to begin is with a passionate God, and with people searching for passionate love, hoping against hope that their search is not in vain.¹

How can Jeremiah stand up in the middle of a burdened world and say, no burdens here? How can Jesus say, “Stand up and walk?” It must be that Jeremiah and Jesus were both youth, who had an obstinate belief in that timeless creed: that the God who began a good work in you will finish it. Amen.

¹ Dean, Kenda Creasy (2004). Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, p. 25-26.