

**A Proclamation of Grace©****Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17****August 25, 2013****Dr. Sharlyn DeHaven Gates**

This story about the bent woman made me think of my great grandmother – Maggie Craig. We called her “Little Gram” because she was very small and short in stature. She wore a braid that circled the crown of her head and of course, always wore a dress no matter what she was doing.

Little Gram had known sorrow and hardship. She had lost a daughter who died while giving birth and her husband had died years ago as well. She took care of her sister, Dell, who lived with her and had suffered all her life with Rheumatoid Arthritis that caused every part of her body to be bent and twisted.

Little Gram made the best mincemeat, the most wonderful pie and delicious stuffing at Thanksgiving and Christmas. She provided fresh flowers for her church every Sunday for years, and she loved her many plants that she nurtured with water and plant food, transporting them inside and out so they would get sunshine or be protected from the cold and frost. She nurtured a fern that she had had since my grandmother, her daughter, was 2 years old!

But, as Little Gram got older she became bent over with osteoporosis. Year after year she was more and more bent until, whether she was sitting or standing, she had to twist her neck to look up at whoever she was talking to. She never complained. She just lived with her condition.

So when I read this story where Jesus was in the synagogue for worship – a Sabbath Day – and he saw this bent over little woman, I naturally picture Little Gram ... Maggie ... and her sister, Dell; two women, bent, with a narrow view of life around them because of their physical condition, yet women who brought so much joy to their family and friends.

Our story tells us this woman – this bent over little woman - was there, respecting the law of the Sabbath that she had been brought up with. Of course, as a woman in Jesus’ day she would not have been inside the synagogue during the worship period. She would have been outside waiting for it to be over. Maybe she was waiting for a husband or a son – the ones who had the right to be on the inside. Or maybe she was just there – in her place – outside – because she too loved God.

Is Jesus going out when he sees her? Or is she entering in after worship? Either way, this is an extraordinary story because she is there, and by the way, she does not ask to be healed.

But the religious leader was indignant, not just with Jesus, but with her and all the people. He tells them there are six days in the week when you can ask for healing. You can wait and not do it on the Sabbath!

The Sabbath was more than a day for worship, of course. The Sabbath was a day for rest. It was the Law of Moses – from the 10 Commandments given by God – that the people should take one day to rest, and trust me, that command would have been a welcome relief for the Israelites back in Moses' day. After all, they had been rescued from slavery in Egypt after they and their ancestors had 500 years of probably never having a day off, or much rest, at all.

The Sabbath was highly respected and a sacred, holy day. Today, with the stories we hear of Jesus being criticized by the religious leaders for healing on the Sabbath, we tend to just think of it as an old law that was filled with rules and regulations. But it was, for the most part, a good thing.

In fact, wouldn't taking a day of rest be a relief for you sometimes? A real, full day of doing nothing but resting and giving thanks to God and enjoying a quiet time either alone or with family.

Today, we are so busy with work and family, our children and grandchildren in every competitive sport or school activity, (and that's okay too, but it does keep us busy). We are constantly connected with our smart phones, with emails and texts, computers, radio, iPods – a constant wired frenzy with not much possibility of real quiet unless we are very intentional about getting unplugged and away from it all.

Does a Sabbath sound good to you? Or do you freak out with the idea of being disconnected, of having real silence and rest?

You see, the religious leader – he was trying to uphold this important day. It was his job and he took it seriously. You just weren't supposed to work on the Sabbath!

David Lose writes in his commentary on this passage: "Once you start making exceptions for this reason or that, pretty soon no one is really keeping the Sabbath and it's lost its point altogether.

And it's not just the Sabbath. The whole law is like that -- keep making exceptions and it's not really a law anymore; it's more like a suggestion, with little or no power to protect and preserve us."

(Remember when Miss Emily, the Church Lady joked about a church that was so poor they could only afford 10 suggestions, instead of 10 commandments?)

I think it's important for us to see the point of view the leader of the synagogue had. He was protecting the law.

But, Jesus saw it differently. Did Jesus *disrespect* the Law of Moses? I don't think so. He was there, in the synagogue – a devout Jew, worshipping God. But, how can you worship and give thanks to God who gives life, and then ignore one of God's own children who is bound up and bent over, especially when you are God's son and have the compassion and the ability to heal and give her new life?

He goes to *her*, not the other way around. She did not come begging to be healed. It probably never crossed her mind on this Sabbath Day. She was just there doing what she always did. But Jesus walked to her, put his hands on her and proclaimed, "You are set free! Stand straight!" And she did.

Can you imagine? A woman who was used to being bent low, staring at the ground, suddenly standing straight? Now there was cause for praising God ... and praise God she did!!! I would have loved to see that happen to Little Gram or her sister, Dell.

Here we have a law versus grace story. We might, at first hearing, say the law was ridiculous. We might be critical of the synagogue leader for being so rigid. But really, if we think about it, most of us have laws we respect and believe should be kept, don't we?

I drive down the highway and get so aggravated when someone passes me in a no pass zone. That yellow line is there for a reason! It's to keep idiots like them (and me) from getting hit head on!

Or someone is riding right on my bumper until they can finally speed past me. "Where is the highway patrol when we need them?" I might ask out loud.

Or when fireworks continue to be shot off night after night after night when it's supposed to be over. It's the law!

But, hopefully, there are times when we welcome grace right into the middle of the law. When I worked for the Upper Room there were policies to follow ... rules and regulations for the common good of the workplace. I remember, once, when I hadn't been there too many months, making a pretty big mistake and being nervous about talking to our Program Director. But when I did, Tom said to me, "we believe in grace around here." And he helped me to figure out what to do so I didn't make that mistake again.

David Lose says, "Law helps order our world, but grace is what holds the world together."

Jesus told the synagogue leader, “This woman is a daughter of Abraham. She is one of us. She is a human being. On the Sabbath, you would untie your donkey and lead it to water. Why would we not untie this woman on this day; a woman who has been bound up – tied up – for 18 years? Why should she wait another day?”

So ... where are you in this story? Are you more like the synagogue leader – having relied on rules and laws all your life, trusting in them and counting on them to protect? What about laws in the Bible? I wonder if sometimes we humans don’t get a bit over reactive to some of the old laws we read about. We even turn against each other saying “the Bible says this,” and the other person says, “no, it says this” – or at least, it *means* something else.

In any of those situations where the law is stated in the Bible, can you picture Jesus stepping in and seeing through the strict, stringent, rigid policy and offering grace instead?

Like the woman who committed adultery. The law said to stone her to death, which is what they were about to do. They were in the right. But Jesus offered grace. He said, whoever is without sin, you be the one to throw the first stone. And they all left.

Or, do you see yourself in the bent woman’s place? There are a lot of things in our lives that cause us to feel bent over more and more. A mound of debt that is so heavy we are weighed down and cannot see far enough or clear enough to see the end of it. Maybe it’s because of medical bills or maybe it’s because we were careless. The reason matters because of how we feel about ourselves.

Or we are bent over, bound up with addictions – too much love for wine or prescription drugs or fattening food. We feel weighted down and hopeless because, try as hard as we can, we can’t seem to straighten up on our own. And the world mocks us and judges us and we feel we are the outsiders and don’t have an inside place with those who seem to have it all together.

Most of us, I believe, are in *both* of those places at times. We can be good at judging. We can be rigid about law keeping. But sometimes I think the more we are bent over with burdens, the more rigid we can become about the law, because if the law were enforced even more, it might stop us from destroying ourselves.

Or at least, if we dwell on the law – on right and wrong, and how others are not keeping it very well – we can sometimes ignore our own problems and faults.

But, don’t forget, the law was given to us first. God gave those commandments to Moses to help the people live a good life; and to help them live in relationship with God. Trouble is – as hard as we might try to live the law perfectly, we still fall short. We know God loves the law, but God loves us too.

So then there was grace. Grace that came down from heaven in human form. God incarnate is what John calls it in his gospel. The Word became Flesh and lived among us. Jesus, the Son of God, brings such grace that it trumps the law – every time. The Pharisees and the Sadducees and Chief Priests and all the temple leaders were trying to keep the law and that’s why they hated Jesus, because he was pure grace and grace does trump the law.

So, if you feel compelled to put law first, you aren’t very different from many people. But maybe you would like to relax a little. It takes great effort to be rigid and to hold on to something that can’t be kept perfectly anyway. When I say you, I mean all of us ... because I do believe that all of us have some of that law-holding rigidity within us.

But if you feel bent over, weighted down with burdens or pain or shame or guilt ... Jesus comes to us. Jesus dies for all those things; takes them onto himself. He said, “Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.” Stand up! Be straight. You are free because of grace!

The author of Hebrews says this: (translated through the Message) (Now,) You’ve come to Jesus, who presents us with a *new* covenant, a fresh charter from God. He is the Mediator of *this* covenant. The murder of Jesus, (unlike Abel’s) —a homicide that cried out for vengeance—became (instead) a proclamation of grace.”

Grace trumps the law when it comes to God’s precious people – and that is what you all are! A cherished, precious child of God.

You ... sons and daughters of God ... you are set free of whatever it is that weighs you down. Stand up straight and give praise for this proclamation of grace, given through Jesus Christ.

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