

What We Protect Matters

Luke 13:10–17

It starts the way Sabbath always starts ... quietly.

A room full of people who've learned how to shoulder another week. A hum of prayers like a shawl thrown over tired shoulders. No spotlight. No fog machine. Just a woman that most people stopped really seeing a long time ago.

She slips in the way she always slips in, curved like a question mark the room forgot to answer. Eighteen years. But you can get used to almost anything if it hangs around long enough.

But Jesus sees what the room stopped seeing. He calls her over.

Hands, words, breath. And then the line she could never forget once she heard it: "Woman, you are set free."

She straightens. Now, she can see faces where she was used to seeing only feet.

Meanwhile, the head guy clears his throat and reminds everyone, very reasonably, that there are six other days for work, and Jesus should do his healing then, because that's what leaders do when grace shows up and starts moving the furniture around.

Because in every room, what we protect matters.

Let's come back to our story in a minute.

I served a church years ago, and they'd written into their founding DNA a remarkable promise: every year, twenty percent of the budget went to outreach. Rain or shine, twenty percent, straight out the door. I was impressed when the search committee told me about it, pride shining in their eyes.

Then the economy hiccuped. Giving slid the way giving slides when people get nervous. We gathered around the long table with coffee that tasted like it was brewed during the Reagan administration and the spreadsheets everyone pretended to read. Where do you look for cuts so you can keep everything else afloat?

And the word came back: Personnel.

They decided we could make up the shortfall in giving without having to cut much of anything. All we had to do was keep personnel costs the same for a couple of years, and we might eventually dig out of the hole we were in. We could keep pace with maintenance, repairs, and outreach if we kept personnel costs static.

Now, as the person responsible for advocating for the staff, I pointed out that in a difficult economy and with the rise in the cost of living, to keep personnel costs the same for the

foreseeable future wasn't just failing to give people a raise; it was asking people to accept pay cuts indefinitely.

Silence. Not angry silence. Just that stillness that falls when a room realizes the math problem isn't on the paper; it's in the mirror. I assumed everyone was trying to be faithful. But love, it turns out, can get tangled.

I didn't have a grand solution. I just had a question that wouldn't go away: are we untying oxen while leaving neighbors bound?

There's a street I think about in another part of the world. A median has been turned into a parking lot for trucks—rows and rows of them under sun-bleached tarps. If you squint, you can read the labels: rice, flour, cooking oil, antibiotics.

Drivers play cards in the shade. Everyone is waiting on a signature. Children learn how to wait by watching their mothers.

The writing on the tarps fades while the little ones learn new words for “not today.”

Lately, the world’s famine monitors have said out loud what hungry people have known for months: parts of Gaza have crossed the line into famine. People are starving. Babies are dying.

You can argue about politics, but you can’t argue with empty bellies. And still, thousands of trucks sit loaded just beyond the border. UN workers say they have warehouses full in Egypt and Jordan, enough to load thousands of trucks with food and medicine ready to roll as soon as the light turns green. Mercy made into math problems.

There’s a story going around aid circles about pallets of high-energy biscuits. They’re emergency food designed for moments exactly like this. They sat stacked in a Dubai warehouse until their clock ran out. Too much time spent waiting for the right

permission in the right order. So after the “sell-by” date had passed, somebody in the government said, “Burn ‘em.”

Imagine a parent watching smoke and thinking of a child who hasn’t chewed anything but the inside of their own cheek for a day and a half. Flour turns to ash while children grab their distended bellies.

But on the other side of the ledger (because there’s always another side), money for weapons seems to find its way around obstacles with the speed of electricity. Budgets move with astonishing clarity when power’s at stake.

But bread?

Bread needs a signature. Bread needs a secondary inspection. Bread needs a meeting, and then another meeting. Bread waits while the calendar clears.

Closer to home, a woman stands at a pharmacy counter. The receipt is long enough to be a scarf. The pharmacist is kind but practiced in kindness, which tells you everything you need to know. There's an asthma inhaler on the counter, shoes on layaway, and a car that sounds like it's gargling nails. She does the arithmetic: the shoes can wait; the car can make one more noise; the puffer can't. Or maybe it can. Depends on the week.

A man who's worked all his life watches a smarmy politician give a speech about how the thing he's paid into since he was old enough to shave is "unsustainable."

Unsustainable. The word crashes around his living room and knocks over a few pictures he can't afford to replace.

If you listen, these aren't separate stories. They hum at the same frequency. Trucks waiting. People waiting. Some things always moving quickly, things like money, missiles, military might. But

some things always have to wait for the right day ... that never seems to arrive.

Which is when our woman from the synagogue wanders back in, and wants to know whether we've learned to untie **what** belongs to **us** while leaving **who** belongs to **God** tied up nice and tight.

I didn't come today to pick a fight with rules. Rules are important ... especially when they keep future versions of us from forgetting who we meant to be.

That twenty percent rule in the church's bylaws? It was written by people who'd wanted to be generous, wanted to make sure nobody could quietly shrink their hearts down to "realistic" size later. Policies can be love letters we write to tomorrow.

But love letters aren't wedding rings. If a policy meant to help the vulnerable ends up making the very people asked to carry it out vulnerable themselves, then a principle that began as a sacred

commitment is being forced to bear a burden it was never meant to hold.

What's a rule for? I mean, that's the question, right? The synagogue had rules. Jesus had Sabbath. Those two aren't enemies, unless the rules forget why the Sabbath exists.

Jesus doesn't scold the woman because he's got more important things to do. He doesn't tell her to come back when the paperwork is finished. He calls her over and lays his hands on what hurts. He speaks release. He points to her and calls her. But what he **doesn't** call her is "problem." He calls her "daughter." Daughter of Abraham, a daughter of the covenant.

Jesus reaches back into the promise made to the first people who ever heard God say, "I will bless you so that you will be a blessing," and he pulls this unnamed woman into the middle of it.

And then, he borrows an image every farmer in the room already understands: "You untie your ox on the Sabbath and lead it to water, right?" Heads nod. Of course. Mercy for the animals is obvious.

But then Jesus pivots: "How much more this daughter?"

He doesn't say Sabbath doesn't matter. He says Sabbath is exactly the **right** day for untying. Not a day to pretend we can't see. It's a day to prove that we can.

Jesus tells her she's "set free," and when he talks about the ox, he says "you loose" it. It's the same root in Greek. Sabbath, in this story, isn't a fence to keep mercy **out**; it's a gate to let mercy **in**.

I don't know what rooms you sit in where the arithmetic always seems to come up short. Maybe it's your kitchen table where the envelopes with windows pile up and your kids' shoes keep

inventing new ways to fall apart. Maybe it's a conference room where people debate abstract nouns like "fiscal responsibility," "stability," and "accountability."

Maybe it's the quiet corner of your own mind where the rules you learned as a kid about not making a scene, not asking for help, or not being a burden have become so holy you can't even imagine Jesus wanting to untie them.

What if the gospel isn't inviting us to be reckless with money or naive about limits? What if the gospel is driving us to be brave about purpose?

What if Sabbath is the one day a week we practice the future so hard that we start seeing it in the present?

What if the question isn't "Can I afford this?" but "Who am I trying to set free?"

You need a different calculator to answer those. questions.

I suspect someone will say, "This sounds awfully political."

And I get it. Jesus didn't get crucified for bad manners.

But the politics I'm talking about aren't about teams and colors and whose slogan fits on a hat. I'm talking about the **oldest** question: What are human beings **for**?

Pharaoh has an answer. So does Jesus. Pharaoh says the bricks matter more than the backs that carry them. Jesus says backs were made for blessing, not bricks.

Pharaoh calls hunger a budget line. Jesus calls it an emergency.

Pharaoh asks if it's legal. Jesus asks if she can stand up. If that's "political," it's only because the world keeps trying to privatize compassion.

But here's the thing: mercy isn't a side project; it's Sabbath's native tongue.

If bread waits, stuck in a warehouse while budgets sprint to war, our silence becomes an endorsement.

If our policies polish brass while backs that are supposed to be protected are forced to bend, our piety is counterfeit.

The test isn't "Were we compliant? Was it 'cost-efficient,' but 'Did anybody stand up?'"

Let the trucks move. Open the warehouses. Loosen the checkpoints. Pay workers what's just. Choose the neighbor over the narrative, the daughter over the donkey, the person over the policy.

Let it be said of us: they untied what they could, they stood beside what they could not, and they refused to bless the knots. Because what we protect matters.

I don't have a checklist today. I have a summons. A nameless woman stands up straight, and the respectable folks fume. Jesus calls the Sabbath what it is—freedom day. That should rewire our instincts and break our hearts in the places we've trained to be efficient. It should turn "later" into "now," and "somebody" into "us."

And we're the key. We need to make sure **this** room isn't welcoming to indifference.

We need to advocate that meetings halt until anonymous faces have names. We need to fight for budgets that carry a compass and know when they've strayed from their true direction. We need our prayers to have hands and feet.

We need to straighten what's gotten crooked—not because we can solve everything, but because we refuse to keep the ox watered while a daughter stays bent.

Remember: Jesus already spoke over her ... and over us: "You are set free."

Look at our Gospel now. The woman's still standing. The leader's still fuming, and the crowd is split. Luke says some were put to shame, but the rest rejoiced at the wonderful things he was doing.

That's the choice in every room, isn't it? Tied up or set free.

I don't know what you carried into this room that keeps you bent over.

I don't know what rules you've been keeping so long that you forgot to ask what they were for.

I don't know which policies have become altars in your world.

But I know this: there's a voice, kind and steady and somehow insistent without being cruel, saying, "Come here." There are hands. There's release. Not because you finally got your act together or the math finally worked out in your favor, but because this is who God is.

Sabbath isn't supposed to be a timeout from compassion; it's how compassion keeps the world from breaking.

So, when you find yourself staring at a spreadsheet, or a policy, or your own calendar, and you feel the old panic rise—whisper this like a prayer you're still learning: "What is this for?"

Because what we protect matters.

The reign of God is a room where people stand up straight and the rules remember their purpose.

It's trucks that move and warehouses that empty into kitchens and cooking fires.

It's pharmacies where nobody has to choose between breath and shoes, and living rooms where old promises about Social Security keep paying out because the people they protect belong to **God** before they belonged to any **party**.

It's our little roadside food pantry where the shelves fill and empty and fill and empty, and nobody can explain the math except to say that Jesus seems to show up around bread. In that new world, what we protect is **people**. Because what we protect matters to **God**.

So, daughters and sons of Abraham, straighten your bent backs and lift up your bowed heads. The One who sees you has **already**

called your name. It's time to stand up straight ... the way God always intended.

—Amen.