

You can't see it right now because my hair covers it up, but if I cut my hair short enough, you'll notice that I have a Y-shaped scar on the top of my head. Contrary to what many of my classmates thought back in elementary school, it was not a botched attempt to shave my name into my head, because honestly, who wants to do that anyway. But it came from accident back when I was 6 years old and it's one of my earliest memories that I can remember in vivid detail. Long story short, I was doing something dumb and I tripped and sliced my head on a doorknob. I know, not exactly the most heroic of scar stories.

But the thing that I remember most was that when I got to the emergency room, the doctors were insistent that I needed to hold still so they could put the stitches in. And despite talking it over with my mom and promising that I would hold still, the doctors determined that I needed to be strapped down while they stitched me up. Honestly, I don't remember the stitches being painful or anything like that. What I do remember most vividly was the feeling of being stuck – trapped by these Velcro straps, which were intended to help me, but were, in fact, only increasing the stress and anxiety of that moment.

Now, I don't know if I really could have stayed still during the procedure or not. Ultimately, the doctors did what they felt was necessary to keep me safe. But the thing of it is, whether it was the right decision or not, the stitches went in, I healed up, and I've got scar that reminds me of the ordeal. At least that what's you could see on the outside. On the inside, the experience of being strapped down stayed with me much longer than the stitches. Because even doing what may be the right thing doesn't mean there won't be consequences.

At the heart of this story in the Gospel of Luke is how one is to understand the law of God. Or better yet, how do we apply the law of God in ways that are faithful and true to the intention – the heart – of the law. And that's not always so easy to discern. I mean, in a sense, both Jesus and the leader of the synagogue are correct in their understanding of the Sabbath. Where they differ is their understanding of the heart the law – why God commanded us to keep the Sabbath and honor it as a holy day at all.

It's clear that both Jesus and the leader of the synagogue recognize the Sabbath as a holy day. Both recognize that it's a day of rest. But each is drawing from a different description of the Sabbath in the Old Testament. The synagogue leader appears to be leaning heavily on Exodus 20, which says that the reason for honoring the Sabbath is to imitate and follow in the way of God, who rested on the 7<sup>th</sup> day of creation. However, in Deuteronomy 5, the meaning of the Sabbath changes. There we are instructed to honor the Sabbath as a day of rest because the Israelites knew from their time in slavery what it was to be given no rest. Which means that the Sabbath becomes a justice issue, one centered in liberation and freedom.

Central to this story is the role of the law of God in our life of faith. And even though the leader of the synagogue could be correct in understanding the letter of the law, what he fails to see, what he fails to understand is the heart of why Sabbath matters in the first place. Why the law of God matters at all. You see, his solution to the issue at hand is that those who need healing should wait a few hours until the Sabbath is over. Which is tantamount to saying, "You all need to just suffer a little longer." And the question is, how does that actually align with the heart of the law itself? Did God really want this woman who has been suffering for 18 years to suffer 18 years and a few more hours? How does that honor the Sabbath?

Well, according to Jesus, it doesn't. Because that's not what the law is really about. That's not what the law of God was intended for. The law, which is good and holy and right, is intended to help us live lives of goodness and faithfulness and holiness. But just because something may be the right thing, strictly speaking, doesn't mean there won't be consequences. Too often, the law, which is intended to be good and helpful, becomes the thing that binds us, or that we use to bind others. Too often the law straps people to a table in the name of helping them get better. Because, at the end of the day, the law, and the good order it may bring, can never heal what is broken, it can never set free that which is bound, and it can never bring us wholeness and newness of life.

I think that's the point Jesus is making here. That to be followers of Christ is not to be beholden to the law, which can never give life, but to be attentive to the very heart of God. And what is the heart of God but that which we have come to know in Christ? By the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, we see and know the heart of God – a heart of kindness and compassion, a heart of forgiveness and mercy, a heart of love and grace. A heart that tirelessly seeks the restoration of all that is broken, a heart that longs for all to be healed and made whole, a heart that yearns for the life of the world, that seeks relentlessly for you and me.

My friends in Christ, perhaps the word for us today is heart. That to know and understand the words of faith is one thing – it is good and holy and deeply faithful in its own right. But to know the heart of faith in Christ, to experience the heart of the One who sets us free – that is truly where life and love and wholeness are found. For Christ has taken the law of God and transformed it by his love and grace. For love Christ came into the world. For love Christ suffered and rose from the dead so that you and I could have hope in the midst of our sufferings. For love Christ took on flesh so that we could be set free from all that binds us, so that we could know there really is nothing that could ever separate us from the love of God. For love of Christ is how we have new life. The love of Christ is at the heart of all that we say and do. The love of Christ is the law by which we live, so that mercy and grace may abound in and through our lives, for the sake of the world and our neighbors. Amen.