

Liberated and Known

Luke 13:10-17

*Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight,
O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

This is one of my favorite week so of the year. I love being in Harrisonburg during freshman move in week! I know.... even the traffic! I love it! It means a time of excitement and new adventure! Just being there at the “Block Party in the Burg” yesterday and seeing all these freshmen who are coming to JMU... I KNOW that kind of excitement. There’s so much opportunity in their lives, and I’m excited for what the future holds for them.

It brings me back to the excitement of my freshman year; a time of both joy and also how frightening it was to come to a new place. I left all that I had known—all my friends and family and support systems—and I had come to a place where I was one of 20,000 students and nobody knew my name. Week after week I was trying to introduce myself, learn others’ names, and finding myself exhausted at this process.

I think it was my third week of school when I got a call from my mother with the news that my father was going to be having quadruple bypass surgery. So on top of the stress of fitting in to a new place and being unknown, I was now terrified for my dad! I knew I was going to have to leave to be there for my dad as he recovered, but it would mean missing marching band practice the day before a game. So I went to my band director’s office to explain what was going on.

Now, I had probably only met my band director—and I mean *actually* shaken his hand and said hello—one time at this point, and I think even that was months before at an orientation event. I walked to his office and knocked on the door. He looked up and said,

“Alex Zuber! What can I do for you?”

I was floored... I was one of 20,000 students... One of 500 in the Marching Royal Dukes... one of 65 Trumpets! I had to introduce myself to everyone, but this person had gone out of their way to *know my name*.

I forgot—for a moment—the fear and sorrow I was feeling in that moment. I forgot what was driving me to that door to make my request because for the first time in weeks... I was *known* without even trying.

I felt liberated in that simple moment by the fact that I was *known*.

We see this kind of liberation-through-being-known so much more poignantly in our gospel today... Jesus is teaching in the synagogue. I imagine it was a crowded day in worship. In the midst of this crowd is a woman who has been bent low by a spirit, hurting for 18 years. That’s a long time! At some point her community would probably have given up on noticing her. She would blend in or be overlooked.

Somehow in the midst of this, Jesus sees her... *knows her...* calls her... heals her... touches her. Jesus, in this *knowing*, liberates this woman.

"Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

He does this on the Sabbath day, and he makes some folks pretty mad. In being known, there is liberation. This is the heart and history of Sabbath.

The beginning of sabbath is literally the beginning. In the first chapter of Genesis, God creates the world, persistently delighting in the goodness of all God has made, and on the last day, finally rests. The first sabbath day God takes time to rest in the midst of God's goodness. The heart of Sabbath is God knowing and claiming God's creation as Good. This act of total rest is passed on to the Hebrew people, that they may take time for worship and renewal, and as God did, rejoice in God's goodness.

There's a bold promise for all people in taking time to rest and find delight in God's creation. Because if we're talking about creation, we're talking about you! God didn't stop creating after resting, God kept going, all the way until God saw fit to knit you together in your mother's womb. And God called this work good.

God knows and claims you as part of the goodness of creation. As we rest and renew on the sabbath, we gather and hear God claim us and love us to new life. So friends, hear this clearly: a central part of sabbath is gathering around the promise that God loves you, that God formed you, that God delights in you exactly as God made you. God thinks you're worth dying for, and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ shows us that God thinks you're even worth coming back for. No lies uttered against you, no insecurity tearing at you, no ways in which you may have strayed from this promise of God's love, NOTHING ELSE IN ALL OF CREATION will take this promise away from you. God rests this sabbath in the *knowledge* of you, and has named you an indispensable part of God's *good* creation. In knowing us, god has liberated us in mercy that we may liberate others.

God fully knows you. Now the challenge with that promise at the heart of sabbath is this: God loves that person sitting next to you—whom you like very much—the exact same way. God loves that person sitting a few rows away from you—whom you like a little less—the exact same way. And God loves the person not here today—whom you like least of all—the exact same way. And God is calling us to share this Sabbath love, so inextricably tied to the goodness of God's creation, with everyone, especially those with whom we don't want to share God's love, or see the very image of God.

This is at the same time liberating, and convicting. Sabbath is no easy thing. We are known and loved by God. God shows us that we are always on God's heart. And so we are sent to know and love one another. We are sent to liberate our neighbor, rejoicing in the image of God we're called to see in each and every person.

Like the woman in our story, like god has done in each of our messy lives of sin, we are called to see through it all to those who cry out for liberation. Justice is rooted in returning creation to the goodness that God proclaimed from the beginning.

Because we can see what happens when creation is not good... when all is not as Eden would have it... when sin gets in the way... when we as citizens of a shared humanity recognize today as the 400th Anniversary of the first enslaved Africans arriving on the shores of Virginia, and grapple still with the painful and lasting legacy of chattel slavery... when the Amazon rainforest, the lungs of our planet that produces 20% of our oxygen, is burning at an unprecedented rate... when our hearts are full of bitterness and resentment, shame and fear, all things that hold us back from seeing the divine image and claiming the goodness of creation...

This is when we seek the heart of sabbath—the heart of the Jesus movement—that has guided Christ's acts from his first sermon in Luke 4, where, once again, picking up a scroll and teaching in the synagogue, Jesus said, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Christ has come to liberate. Christ has come to set us free from the bonds of sin and death. Sabbath is rooted in liberation, and liberation is rooted in justice, and justice is rooted in restoring the goodness of God's creation. Liberation is the very heart of sabbath. And this begins in resting in the promise that God knows us, and it is God's deepest joy to liberate us, that we might liberate others.

As we observe this time of sabbath today, we have been liberated and known. Sabbath is not found in strict adherence to a sense of propriety or immutable rules that maintain our own self interests.. Sabbath is found in knowing that we are held so tightly to the very heart of God, even when we least deserve it. God surveys creation and calls it Good, and so as we who have been commanded to observe the sabbath find rest, we are to seek the goodness of creation. Sabbath is a law, and like all laws, we as imperfect disciples will follow the law imperfectly. Though this is an observance of rest that has been commanded to us, I pray today that you receive the invitation to Sabbath as a gift as the woman in the synagogue did, and go out rejoicing!

Rejoice to feel the waters of the font as you are sent out, knowing that in those waters God is claiming Jack today and has claimed each of you as children forever. Rejoice in the meal of everlasting life, where we are known by God and counted among the saints as Christ's body is given for *you*. Rejoice in the forgiveness of sins, rejoice in the liberation of God's people. Rejoice in the full knowledge of God's love for you. Rejoice in knowing God's heart for justice, compassion, and mercy for all people. I pray on this sabbath day that we, Christ's church, be given new eyes to see the weary and ignored among us as God sees them. I pray we be given a new heart of liberation, pouring compassion and mercy out on a weary world. May we stand up straight, rejoicing it what God has done for us and through us!

In our well-rested rejoicing the world may come to see, through this gift of sabbath, that they too have been liberated and known.

Amen.