

Twenty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Introduction

For the last eight weeks we have been following Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. As we have seen, this is a journey in which tension and conflict is never far from the surface; sometimes it arises through events and encounters along the way, sometimes it shows up in the stories, comments or instructions of Jesus. Last week the Gospel passage raised the possibility of conflict arising as a consequence of faithfulness, with Jesus urging his disciples not to shy away from the tensions which would inevitably arise as they proclaimed the Kingdom of God. Today's text – an objection-type 'pronouncement story' which is unique to Luke – shows us Jesus living out this instruction himself. Interestingly both Jesus and the unnamed synagogue leader employ the same tactic and invoke the same justification and there is an interesting play on the idea of being bound woven through the passage which can raise questions for us as we consider our own behaviour in situations of conflict.

Preparation: There are five 'characters' in the story – three individuals and two 'groups'. Choose one from each category and write a very short, imaginative account of the incident from those perspectives. You might want to consider the emotions, motivations, justifications etc. which could perhaps be evoked and invoked as the scene plays out.

Text

Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath.

And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.

When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.”

But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water?”

And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?”

When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Comment

As has been previously noted, Luke and the other evangelists use a range of literary devices to help their readers engage with the message of Jesus. Today's passage – the fourth of five ‘Sabbath healings’ in Luke – involves a pronouncement story of the ‘objection’ type. These are vignettes in which an objection is raised against the words or actions of the primary character or their close associates, followed by a response to the objection from the primary character. Usually (as here) this is Jesus himself and the response brings out a deeper level of meaning or discloses some hidden truth. These stories thus centre round a situation of conflict and in this instance its locus is whether healing on the sabbath should be classed as work.

It is perhaps all too easy to cast the synagogue leader as the narrow-minded legalistic villain of the piece and to assume that what Jesus argues is radically new and represents an overthrow of Jewish understandings of their sacred texts. In reality though, Jesus is simply entering what was an ongoing debate at the time as to the interpretation of Sabbath laws: whilst the Tanakh prohibits ‘work’ on the Sabbath in various places (e.g. Ex 20:10; 31:14–15; Lev 23:3; Deut 5:12–15) and specifies who should not work, it does not define what actually constitutes work. The question of how to apply the laws and ethical positions set out in the Torah in different situations was a subject of ongoing rabbinic debate. In this instance, whilst life-saving interventions were generally accepted as exempt from the prohibition on Sabbath work, everything else was still open to question. The synagogue leader raises an objection based on one possible (and accepted) interpretation of what came under the umbrella of ‘work’. Jesus responds by employing a standard rabbinic *qal vahomer* (from a lesser to a greater case) argument to suggest a different possibility. The rejoicing of the crowd at the end of the story seems to suggest that the majority ‘correctly find no violation of halakhah’ in this response*.

Both men behave in similar ways in response to this underlying tension: the synagogue leader makes a very public and persistent response (the Greek verb is in the imperfect tense which suggests a continual or repeated action) to the healing – it seems his intent was to whip up the crowd. In effect he brings the latent conflict out into the open and fans the flames. Similarly Jesus not only makes a very public response (he could perhaps have ignored the challenge or spoken to the objector more privately) but also uses language which seems designed to stoke the fire and which leaves at least some listeners in a less than happy state. Neither of them shy away from public conflict because what lies at its root is something which each deems important. For Jesus this ‘something’ is to do with the ministry to which he has been publicly committed since his baptism – rendering visible the Kingdom of God.

In both instances they use the word 'ought' in connection with their view on how the law should be interpreted. In English the word can indicate both moral obligation and (the somewhat different) prudent expediency. However the sense of the Greek word used here (*dei*) is much more inclined towards the former, indicating a logical necessity, the right and proper response to a situation**. The old-fashioned term 'behoves' or the prayer book's 'it is meet and right so to do' might give a clearer feel of this meaning. This sense of obligation is located in the related root word *de* – to bind – which is often used figuratively in the New Testament. It can be related to different types of binding (such as with the woman here) including being bound to God (for example Acts 20:22 Paul speaks of being *deo ho pneuma* – bound/constrained by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem).

Throughout his gospel, Luke uses *dei* in connection with Jesus and this sense of being compelled to speak and act in a certain way. In fact it is a key part of the very first words we hear from Jesus in 2: 49 (also, interestingly, an 'objection' story): when questioned by his mother about his return to the temple he responds '*Did you not know that I must (dei) be in my Father's house?*' Similarly in 4:43 when the crowd tries to detain him in one place he tells them "*I must (dei) proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.*" Right from the outset we see Jesus expressing a deep sense of commitment to the task he has been given and a willingness to follow where that leads, even if it brings him into conflict with his family, his disciples, the crowds or the authorities.

In this instance the 'must' – "*and ought not this woman...*" – springs from Jesus' deep conviction about the nature of the Kingdom he has been called to proclaim, and of God's will for a full and flourishing life for his people. It is this conviction which leads him to heal the woman who has endured long years of restriction; similarly it leads him to engage with the resulting conflict as a way to teach about the Kingdom by indicating a different possibility for understanding the Sabbath law – "*ought not this woman...be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?*" – through its ancient connection with the remembrance of the deliverance of the Israelites from slavery (Deut 5:15).

It would seem then that these two protagonists have much in common: both invoke the divine order as the ground for their actions; both make a claim about moral obligation based on their particular understandings of this order and their convictions about what it binds one to do. Moreover neither draws back from using (and even perhaps escalating) conflict in support of their position. The difference lies in the animating understandings and resulting commitments of each and, crucially, in their purpose in fomenting conflict. On the one hand, this seems to be in the cause of simply reinforcing a particular view, on the other in order to open up and expand understandings and the associated possibilities for fruitful action. This leads us back to Pádraig's observation last week that conflict '*must seek some other purpose than its own propagation, or its own victory. It must be in the service of creation: of a just society, of a more hopeful present, of a more flourishing world, of a safer environment, of a more sustainable world, of a richer communion.*'

References

*Amy-Jill Levine, *The Annotated Jewish New Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 2011) p. 130.

**W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London: Oliphant, 1978), vol. 1, p. 115, p. 126–7; vol. III, p. 147–8.

You might like to consider some of these points with respect to a conflict situation in which you are involved using the questions below or any others which the reflection raises for you:

What are the underlying narratives and convictions which are being brought into this situation?

To what positions or actions might such narratives or convictions bind those involved? Are these ones which are likely to be helpful or harmful?

What is the desired end of this conflict? Is it waged in the service of creation or control? Is its active continuation or escalation being contemplated? If so is this justifiable?

What are my motives for being involved?

Prayer

Jesus,
it seems conflict was a regular part
of your experience of life
just as it is of ours.

Whenever we encounter and engage with conflict,
or consider instigating or escalating it
keep us mindful of the patterns
which you have set before us:

make us attentive to the motivations which drive us
and the commitments which bind us
and help us to judge
with honesty and clarity
whether these are ones which will
help or hinder
the fuller flourishing of others.
Amen.

Further Reading

For more on different types of pronouncement stories and their function see:

Robert C. Tannehill, *The Shape of the Gospel: New Testament Essays* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007) pp. 19–98.

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Argument and Anger