

Here Comes the Queen

Luke 13:10-17

Sermon by Mark Schloneger

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On a Sabbath Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues, and a woman was there who had been crippled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." Then he put his hands on her, and immediately she straightened up and praised God.

Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, "There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath."

The Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the stall and lead it out to give it water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?"

When he said this, all his opponents were humiliated, but the people were delighted with all the wonderful things he was doing. (Luke 13:10-17, NIV)

What would you do to welcome the queen?

What would you buy?

Would you look her in the eye,

just say "Hi,

thanks for dropping by,"

and then offer a spot of tea and a slice of pie?

Or would you be all shy,

and try not to die

until she says goodbye,

and then go tell all your friends till morning is nigh?

I don't mean to pry,

but I'd like a reply.

What would you do to welcome the queen?

What would you wear?

Would you style your hair,

freshen the air,

bow with a flair,

and then try not to stare?

Or would you offer a chair,

invite her to share,

to really lay herself bare,

and then close with prayer?

But what if you weren't aware
that she was already there?
Well, then . . . you wouldn't even care.
You would do nothing to welcome the queen.

Her name in Hebrew is Shabbat Hamalka,
she's the "Queen of the Sabbath" --
that's what her name literally means in English.
In Jewish tradition, Shabbat Hamalka is the personification of the seventh day,
and she must be received in style.
To the Jews, Shabbat arrives a few minutes before sundown on Friday.
At that time, two candles are lit,
and families gather for a time of worship --
giving thanks to God for God's creation and liberation.
After that, they dine on a lavish dinner,
simply enjoying each other's company.
The rest of the evening is spent talking with family and friends
and studying of the Torah.¹
The thing is, none of this would happen without intention,
without preparation.

The Sabbath needs to be embraced to be truly welcomed.
But what if you weren't aware that she's already there?
Well, then, in that case. . . you wouldn't even care.
You would do nothing to welcome the queen.

She comes on the Sabbath,
and she enters the scene
bent over like a windswept tree,
carrying the weight of the world on her back.
Do you see her?
She comes to the synagogue slowly, carefully, almost imperceptibly,
like dusk turning to night,
straddling a difficult yesterday with a hard tomorrow.
For eighteen years, she hasn't stood up straight,
raised her head and stretched toward the sky.
And if that weren't enough,
her condition makes her socially. . . disvalued, unclean,
a woman to be kept at a distance, on the edge, in the corner.
She comes to the synagogue
and I doubt anyone but Jesus is aware that she is there.

¹ Marva Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989), 11-16.

What do you do to welcome the queen?
Jesus is teaching at the synagogue,
and he calls her close.
“Woman, you are set free,” he says,
and, when he lays his hands on her,
she stands up straight and begins praising God.
She’s the queen on this Sabbath.
In her body, she personifies the seventh day,
calling God’s people to observe and remember
the goodness of God’s creation, the fullness of God’s liberation.
She praises God for her healing on the Sabbath, for her Sabbath rest.
Shabbat Hamalka.

He comes on the Sabbath, too,
and he enters the scene standing tall,
like an oak of righteousness.
He’s the synagogue leader,
and he comes to the synagogue
carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.
Everybody sees him.
He has responsibilities.
He plans the worship.
He chooses the readers, the leaders, the preachers,
the pray-ers, the singers.
He represents God’s people to God’s world.
And how will the world know the holy God,
if he won’t uphold God’s holy law
that makes God’s people a holy nation?
Yes, he carries the weight of the world on his shoulders,
He needs Shabbat Hamalka, and he doesn’t see her.
Oh, don’t write him off because you stand with Jesus,
as if you are pure and holy
and have always seen that
the heart of the law is its love and not its letter.
Come on, the church is filled with people like him.
I’ve been and sometimes still am a person like him.
We’ve been and sometimes still are people like him,
people observing rituals and rules
fit to receive a queen
but aren’t even aware that she’s already there,
seeking Sabbath rest among us
but only finding more burdens to carry.

This past week, I ran across a short video clip
that came from a sermon by Lamar Hardwick,

a pastor of Tri-Cities Church in East Point, Georgia.
In the clip, he surely draws from his experience as someone with autism
to discuss what COVID-19 has revealed about the church.
He says that that the distance, the disconnect,
that we feel because of COVID
is equivalent to the distance
that has always existed for those with disabilities,
and it has exposed the church's unwillingness, ignorance, and inability [to address it].

Throughout the pandemic, when the church wasn't able
to carry on as normal, when we weren't able to meet together,
the church got creative, found money to do things,
found ways to provide access to worship services.
But all this did, Hardwick says, was to show the disability community
that it could have been done the whole time.²

I don't know the scripture text that he was focusing on,
but it surely would have fit the one before us this morning.

At an upcoming delegate session in May for Mennonite Church USA,
delegates will consider a resolution
calling congregations to evaluate and increase their work
to remove the barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities
from participating into all areas of church life.³

I'm glad that Berkey Avenue Mennonite Fellowship
is one of the sponsoring congregations for this resolution,
but our work is not finished – we have to keep it before us.

As the formerly crippled woman is still praising God for her healing,
the synagogue leader, that oak of righteousness,
is indignant that Jesus cured the woman on the Sabbath.-

He feels the need
to remind the people of the law the words of the law.
“There are six days on which to work,” he says,
come on those days to be cured, not on the Sabbath.”

But Jesus is having none of this pretentious piety.
“You hypocrites,” he says (notice the plural --
it's as if he's addressing not only the leader but us Luke's readers).
“You hypocrites,” he says,
and then he reminds us that we treat our animals with more grace
than we give to people God loves.

Ought not they be free from their bondage on the sabbath day?

² <https://twitter.com/autismpastor/status/1488166807974424578>.

³ <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/MC-USA-Accessibility-Resolution-FINAL-7-20-21.pdf>.

And the synagogue leader and all who are with him,
wither in shame,
while the woman and the crowd with her
they stand up straight, raise their heads, stretch toward the sky,
rejoicing at all the wonderful things that Jesus was doing.

On that Sabbath day in that synagogue,
just like another Sabbath day at another synagogue,
Jesus proclaimed the fulfillment of the Sabbath.

Jubilee, the year of the Lord's favor
is good news to the poor,
release for the captives,
recovery and inclusion for the disabled,
and freedom for the oppressed.

Jesus is driving home the point that any interpretation of law
or tradition that keeps people in bondage
has no place in the kingdom of God.

If a synagogue leader, or a church, interprets Scripture in a way
that produces or perpetuates oppression,
Jesus not only will have no part in it,
he will work against it.

We don't understand Jesus
if we fail to understand and embrace
the Sabbath's connection to justice.

In his sermon a few weeks ago, Richard Kauffman
reminded us of this connection.

The Sabbath laws were God's way of correcting
the age-old problem of social injustice.

And it was to be Israel's way of responding to
God's liberation, deliverance, and compassion.

The Sabbath holds together the spiritual and the social.
They cannot be separated.

When we began thinking about this sermon series on the Sabbath
and how it seemed a fitting beginning to Berkey's theme for this year:

"Rooted and Grounded in Christ's Love,"

Steph Wieand pointed me to a blog post with a simple question as its title:

"How will you be useless to capitalism today?"⁴

I laughed when I heard it, and I think it's because
it's one of those questions that communicates a truth.

And when I searched for that post to read more,
I smiled again when I found it.

⁴ <https://thenapministry.wordpress.com>.

That's because that title is basically the whole post.
There's really nothing more in it than an invitation
to meditate on that question:
"How will you be useless to capitalism today?"

The blog where this post comes from is run by Tricia Hersey,
and she describes herself as a writer, performance artist,
theater maker, activist, theologian, and daydreamer.
Her blog is called Nap Ministry,
and she says its whole purpose is to "examine the liberating power of naps."
She goes on to say what she means: Rest is resistance,
resistance to the powers and principalities
that hold us captive,
that view human beings as machines,
valuable not for who they are but how they look and what they produce.

Nap Ministry, she says, is a social justice movement.⁵

How will you be useless to capitalism today?
Perhaps another way to ask that question is:

What will you do to welcome the queen?

It's not going to happen without preparation, without intention,
without embracing Sabbath values that run counter
to all any system that urges us to get ahead of our neighbors,
to value people for what they produce,
to work for a living so we can consume for a living
and to see time as a commodity to save, invest, and or lose
rather than a gift from God that, in Jesus, never end.

The life for which Jesus frees us, to which Jesus invites us,
in which the Spirit empowers us,
is not ultimately about restraint.

It's a gift to be embraced, to be cherished, to be loved, and to be shared.
And the Sabbath is God's gift for the Jews and through them, for us,
a weekly gift that invites us to reorient our lives to God's embrace
and the freedom that is found within it,
so that we can more fully embrace people just like us,
people searching for rest with a people to rest with.

Here she comes, Shabbat Hamalka,
slowly, carefully, imperceptibly,
like dusk turning to night.
Now go, receive your queen.

⁵ <https://thenapministry.wordpress.com>.