

Today's Gospel takes place on the Sabbath, and if we're going to explore any ideas about Sabbath, we've got to start with the one who wrote, arguably, the most captivating text on the subject: Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel...

Rabbi Heschel believed that Sabbath is far more than a dutiful observance, he believed Sabbath is actually necessary if we're to survive society, to survive a culture that would otherwise enslave us entirely,¹ with all its demands on us and on our time. Heschel wrote that the Sabbath is the presence of God in the world, calling out to the human soul² - - that Sabbath is a day during which we connect with God's longing for us, God's longing for our awareness, and our attention. Heschel also believed that our relationship to the Sabbath, what Sabbath is to us has a direct bearing on who and what we are.³ It's the one day a week when *being* is emphasized over *doing*.

God mandated sabbath so we don't forget the centrality of God in our lives: the expansive and glorious eternal reality to which we are bound, and the truth of love that flows through the universe. God mandated a weekly Sabbath rest, so we don't forget who we are, who we're called to be and what we're called to do. Sabbath is our time to turn away from the unrelenting demands of a greedy, self-serving world, and turn instead toward the life-giving presence of God.

¹ as articulated by his daughter, see Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY: 2005), xiii.

² Ibid, adapted xiv

³ Ibid, adapted xv

In today's Gospel, on the sabbath, Jesus notices a woman who's totally bent over, unable to stand up straight. And, unlike most folks who're healed by Jesus, this woman's not possessed by a demon, she's not in need of forgiveness, we're not told she was born that way, and, interestingly, she doesn't even ask Jesus to be healed. Which is all very curious. Maybe the woman had simply come to believe this was just the way it was for her.

... resigned to her lot in life, perhaps this woman had even stopped imagining that things could be ever different. Her own chronic discomfort, suffered for 18 long years, had perhaps become normalized, and so she might as well just get on with it.

Held down in this position, stuck bent over, this woman has a really narrowed experience of the world, her field of vision limited now to the small patch of ground beneath her feet. She can't fully take in the world around her, she can't marvel at the beauty of the landscape, she can't look up in awe at the stars at night; in her day-to-day life, she can't make eye contact and connect with the folks around her. Bent over like this she'll be treated differently, for sure, folks likely won't consider her an equal, or treat her even as fully human – she's probably often overlooked, or ignored completely; and living largely unseen, invisibilized, surely, the weight of life is even harder to bear.

I saw an artwork online recently, it's a piece of public art that's installed in the street in Barcelona, Spain, it's called "the burden."⁴ It's a large sculpture of a woman, bent over under the weight of a heap of different objects.

⁴ see this post on Instagram, the installation is by Jaume Plensa: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DNlrWHpSgyV/>

Her burden is massive, she's literally weighted down by all she has to 'carry' in life, under all this, we can see, it's impossible for her to stand up straight. The woman in the sculpture has three small children with her, who stand huddled close to her body, and it's clear that under this lifelong strain (from the expectations of the world about who she must be and her place in it all) these small children will grow up in the shadow of this massive burden, and their lives, too, will be shaped and impacted by the weight their mother is forced to carry. The burden will have an intergenerational impact.

I imagine the ailment of the woman in today's Gospel to be something similar. Jesus says she's spent 18 years in bondage to Satan, which is a way of saying this woman's been trapped in her life by all that stands in opposition to God: by the forces of this world that oppress and dominate; forces that allow some great personal freedom, while most are bound and held low by a society or culture, that doesn't really do too much to see to it that all people have the right to experience and know true full freedom. This woman's trapped by unjust forces, unjust forces that are weighing her down, that benefit from her not knowing fullness of life, not knowing any other way; forces that so many worldly systems, then as now, seem entirely aligned with. The woman in today's Gospel shows with her body what it is to carry the weight of life in an unjust world that doesn't care, and be kept there by a society/culture that claims to care, should care, but is, in fact, in thrall to the temptations of worldly power and domination.

I'm pretty sure each of us know something of this woman's experience. We may not carry actual, literal weight on our shoulders, but the weight of our lives can, at times, press heavy on our being.

Our minds can be pressed upon by the burdens we carry - our own perspective, impacted at times, by the great weight of life.

There might be times in our life when all we can really see, because of all we're carrying, is the small patch of ground beneath our feet.

It serves the forces of this world to have so many of us feel burdened and bent over by all we have to carry; just as it serves those same forces to have some of us tempted, tempted to believe we are far more than we are, that we deserve worldly power and influence, we deserve to have it and use it, some of us may be tempted at times in our life by those same enslaving forces to believe we have the right to 'higher status,' to 'stand up' more straight than most, to take up more space than most. Many of us, I'm sure, at different times in our life, have even known what it is to cycle between these responses to the world.

But whether we're brought low or puffed up, it's the stuff of the world telling us a story of how we should feel and respond. The weight is not actually real, and the lift – that's not real either.

Real things do happen in life, for sure, but we needn't be crushed or brought low by them.

Rabbi Heschel is surely right: committing to Sabbath is vital for our survival, our survival in a society such as this, a culture such as this, because it brings us definitively, each week, back to the life-giving truth of God, and this exposes the lies we're told about how we should feel, what our experience of life should be. As part of our rhythm of life, Sabbath opens us up to being restored, healed, in and through the eternal reality of God, each week;

and with our fuller/broader perspective restored, we can come to trust where true power lay and can access incredible inner strength and freedom: what the world puts upon us is not our identity, it is not who and what we are.

In his seminal work on the Sabbath, Rabbi Heschel says: “Out of the days through which we fight and from whose ugliness we ache, we look to the Sabbath as our true home, as our source and destination.”⁵

The Sabbath as our true home, and destination - perhaps, then, this is one way to understand Jesus, when he says, in Matthew’s Gospel, “Come to me, all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”⁶ Sabbath rest is a taste of God’s realm, and it heals and it restores, and all we have to do is commit to show up for it.

Sabbath is an invitation into the abiding peace of the eternal, so we might know, in this life, who and what we truly are, and the truth of freedom, and the inner power that only our turning to God can bring.

⁵ Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 30.

⁶ Matthew 11:28