

## “HOW TO ARGUE LIKE JESUS”

A Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 21, 2016

Text: Luke 13:10-17

I lo-o-ove the way Jesus argues. I would like to learn from him.

There is a difference between arguing and quarreling, of course. Jesus, the peacemaker, was not quarrelsome. But he never backed off from a good argument, and sometimes he even provoked one. He never just said “Whatever.” He never said “Let’s just agree to disagree.”

Take this story, for example. You could look at it as a healing story. Jesus healed a woman with a spirit that had crippled her eighteen years. Everyone rejoiced at this. Except for some curmudgeons. You could leave it at that.

But Jesus did not leave it at that. When the leader of the synagogue took umbrage and told the rest of “the crowd” to come back on a weekday to get healed, Jesus didn’t let that go. He interrupted him. He argued with him. He called him a hypocrite, along with anyone who thought that way. Then, in a classic two-sentence argument, he leveled his foe. That argument is the real story in our reading today.

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?

Boom. Jesus won the argument. And when the entire crowd rejoiced at all the wonderful things he was doing, I think they were rejoicing not only at Jesus’ success in healing the woman, but at Jesus’ winning the debate about doing it on the Sabbath.

I know I rejoice. That he argued back, and that he won.

In fact, I’d like to be more like Jesus in this regard. There is not much likelihood that I will become a healer like Jesus, but I’ll bet I could learn to argue more like him.

Arguing has a bad rep. We say that we don’t like it when people argue. However, I think it was Judge Learned Hand who said “We quarrel only because we do not know how to argue.” Arguing is different from quarreling and fighting. We argue in order to get at the truth. We quarrel or fight in order to get at the other person. Sometimes we think we are just making an argument, when actually we are only trying to defeat or shame another person, or put them in their place. The distinction between arguing and quarreling is difficult to maintain because so often we are not honest with ourselves.

But even if arguing is an attempt to get at the truth, Jesus had a unique way of arguing, and he employed it often.

First of all: He argued for the same reason he healed: to set people free, and give people life. This is the chief thing to remember about Jesus the arguer. That woman had been a slave long enough. In healing her, Jesus had achieved God’s liberating and redeeming goal for that woman. If Jesus would have to cross verbal swords with someone in order to do that for her or for anyone else, he was willing to do so.

Jesus was not trying to prove that he had the right interpretation of Scripture. He was not trying to prove that he alone knew how to write the rules for the Sabbath. He was trying to undo the burden of someone who was thirsting for salvation. That’s all. That was the whole argument of Jesus. All the little arguments he had, like this one, were part of the

one overarching argument of Jesus, who had come to set God's people free.

A second point about the way Jesus argued: He argued from authority. He did not throw out the Sabbath. He referred to the Sabbath and argued for the fulfillment of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a gift from God, a gift of freedom from our labor and our burdens. It was not imposed by God as a test of our righteousness. It was a sign of God's mercy in the first place. Therefore, Jesus' healing was a fulfillment of God's original purpose in giving the Sabbath.

*[The fine print: Actually, Jesus was lifting up Deuteronomy over Exodus. The 10 commandments are given twice in the Old Testament. In the Exodus 20 version, the reason for resting on the Sabbath is that God rested on the seventh day, after creating everything. In the Deuteronomy 5 version, the reason is "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and the Lord brought you out with his outstretched hand and his mighty arm." The crucial difference is that between trying to be similar to God, and remembering what God has done for you.]*

A third point comes out of this. Usually, religious arguments are about what is taboo, or what is permitted. We argue about the law. What we ought to do in order to be ethical, good people. But Jesus' argument is not at all about rules. He is arguing for freedom! He is arguing that we should receive what God is giving us! Not ethics, not rules, but gospel!

His opponents were not prepared for that, and it says that they were therefore "put to shame." Jesus defeated them with his arguments.

Yes, Jesus argued. Almost all the time. With his disciples (remember Peter?), with his friends, with people who wanted to be his disciples, but most of all with his opponents. Even his death was part of an argument. He argued that no one had power to take his life from him, but he chose to lay it down for his

friends, and that was that. Ultimately, he won his argument about the grace of God by giving himself for us to set us free. Free to belong to God, to be children of God, and to serve God "in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness."

What an argument! It flowed from the very heart of God. Jesus was adamant about God's loving purpose for all his people, so he steadfastly opposed the forces which bind us, taking away our life and our liberty. "Come unto me," he said, "and I will give you rest—which is to say, Sabbath."

One last point about the argument Jesus wins in today's reading. It is an argument about Sunday. It is an argument about what we are engaged in at this moment.

And, to be in line with his argument, we must remember that we are not here because there is some rule which says that good people go to church on Sunday. We are here because in this world and in our lives there are strong forces which bind and cripple us and steal our peace and our joy.

Every word of the liturgy and hymns and sermon should work together to remind us to keep rejoicing with that crowd at all the wonderful things Jesus was doing in the name of God. When we gather at the table to feast on the sacrament of our Lord's body and blood, we do so as people who have been unbound. At our weekly reunion we rejoice that Jesus has decisively won the argument against our bondage. We are free. We can stand up straight. We therefore live no longer for ourselves, but for the one who has set us free. Amen.