Our public schools have started a new academic year. Colleges and universities are likewise beginning a new calendar. Football teams, both collegiate and professional, have been practicing. All of these activities are designed to promote growth and excellence. Are we ready to do the same for our spiritual life as well? Our Biblical lesson from Luke gives us such an example today.

During Jesus’ day the temple was still the main place for Jews to congregate and worship on important religious holidays. However, the synagogue was the place where people would gather for the reading of the law. Jesus was a regular attendee. You can picture him sitting among other teachers of the day, listening and asking questions, reading and interpreting Scripture.

A woman who perhaps had severe arthritis or scoliosis and was bent over came to the synagogue for reasons unknown to us. Maybe she wanted to hear Scripture read or interpreted. Maybe she wanted to be healed. Whatever her reason for coming she made no request of Jesus to heal her. She is not the one who approaches Jesus. He sees her and takes the initiative to heal her. In other stories we hear that someone’s faith has helped to heal them. It is interesting that nothing is said of this woman’s faith before or after Jesus heals her. But Jesus knew his actions would raise objections from the crowd because he healed her on a Sabbath day.

You see there were certain codes of conduct appropriate for what one could or could not do on the Sabbath. The Ten Commandments had been given to the Israelites to show them how to become the people of God and build good human relationships. Over the centuries teachers of the law had interpreted the commandments so that they became legal requirements. The synagogue leader calls into question Jesus’ actions from a legalistic perspective, totally overlooking the wondrous miracle of healing that has happened. Jesus focuses on the issue of meeting human need and suggests that in so doing he honors the Sabbath and keeps the fourth commandment. Thus he gives a new understanding different from that which had been traditionally interpreted.
Concern over the suffering of human beings takes precedence over a traditional interpretation regarding how to keep the law of Sabbath rest. For Jesus compassion always trumped the law. Jesus challenged his community to think about what keeping the Sabbath really meant. He wasn’t abolishing the Law of Moses, but helping people in the synagogue to have a better understanding of how to apply that law. The laws were given to help enhance life, not stifle it. Compassion would be the rule for all who would follow Jesus. Thus Jesus gives a new understanding to traditional teaching.

It’s always tempting to castigate the formal religious leaders of Jesus’ day. I’ve often thought of them as being uptight, judgmental, close-minded, harsh, and moralistic. Which, by the way, is what many young people think of Christians today. Yet these first century Jewish religious leaders were trying in their own way to be faithful to Scripture as they understood it. They got up in the morning thinking about God and how they could better serve God. They didn’t always get it right, but in some ways they sound a lot like us.

In what ways do we as a church or denomination hinder liberation and healing for the sake of rules and traditions?

What kinds of healing might we as a church offer to those beyond our four walls. I’m pleased we have an Al-Anon group meeting here at our church Friday evenings. What else might God be calling us to do in ministry?

Like the woman in our Bible story today, have you ever experienced God’s grace coming to you even when you didn’t have the strength or confidence to ask for it?

The story sees Jesus’ action of healing on the Sabbath as a way to keep the Sabbath holy, to fulfill the purpose for which the Sabbath was intended. By freeing her from bondage to her illness, Jesus enabled the woman to fully praise God.

I’ve been reading the book “Last Child in the Woods”, which is about nature deficit disorder. Many children in our society today are as pressed down as the woman in our Bible story today by hectic schedules that leave them little time to play or just be with their families, friends, or nature. We adults are the
same way as well. Perhaps a new appreciation and understanding of Sabbath is in order, one in which we realize that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath and what that means for our behavior and actions.

In a recent Epistle Bishop Coyner commented on the five practices of fruitful congregations, which is the book we read her at Dunlap in one great read a few years ago and the second book our fruitful congregation trainees will be reading in October. Remember those practices we are to be doing here at Dunlap?

We are to engage in radical hospitality, passionate worship, risk taking mission and service, and extravagant generosity. The bishop commented that he frequently hears sermons preached on these topics as he travels throughout Indiana. But the one fruitful practice which seems neglected is that of Intentional Faith Development, which leads to growth and maturity in faith.

As we approach a new Sunday school church year with Christian education Sunday on September 15 I want to ask how you are being intentional in your own faith development. I want to encourage you to attend church school or bible study if you have not done so. I want to encourage you to invite elementary age children to attend our classes. I want to ask how your own personal devotional life is doing.

You know, although the ultimate revelation of God has come in Jesus Christ God still has new things to teach us. How are you growing in your faith? What new understanding is God giving you in your life? Jesus acted with authority regarding the Sabbath and how it was traditionally interpreted. He upbraided the hypocrisy of reactions which would criticize him for so acting. What new understanding of the ministry of Dunlap United Methodist Church might God be wanting us to receive today?