

“Set Free”

Island Heights UMC, Island Heights, NJ

August 21, 2016

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost

Luke 13:10-17

13:10 Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 11 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. 12 When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." 13 When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 14 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." 15 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? 16 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?" 17 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.

Introduction

Today's story from the Gospel of Luke is set in a synagogue. A holy place. The place of worship and learning. The community center for the Hebrew people at the time of Jesus. And this is where Jesus is doing what he does very well—teaching. But it's not just another day. Today's story happens on the sabbath; the sacred seventh day of the week. We're in the holy place on the holy day.

Things proceed as usual until this—Luke writes:

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.

Eighteen years. That's a long time. Unable to stand up straight for eighteen years. Eighteen challenging years with a crippling spirit. This is a physical condition, but also a deeper spiritual issue. There is something in the air. There is something happening here that goes beyond this woman's bent body. Here in the synagogue on the sabbath day something is about to take place.

The Healing

He sees her. Somehow through the crowd she catches his attention. And driven by compassion it's time to cross some lines and break some rules. He does not need to acknowledge her. He certainly does not need to speak to her. She's a woman. And he absolutely does not need to touch her, nor should he. But as always, Jesus is reaching the ones who are unreachable, undesirable, and untouchable. Do you know Jesus does whatever it takes to heal us and set us free. And on this day it's with a word and with a touch of his hand.

When Jesus sees her, he calls her over and says, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment."

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

Spontaneous celebration! She praises God. It's unclear whether she came to the synagogue for healing, or to learn, or to pray. What we do know is that Jesus' hands touch her, she is healed, and in response she instantly starts worshiping God. It's a beautiful and touching moment when God's mercy and grace meet the needs of a human being.

Like the song says, "Jesus' hands were kind hands, doing good to all, healing pain and sickness, blessing children small..."

The Opposition

But an offense has been taken. There is outrage surfacing over this incident. The leader of the synagogue has been insulted. The established power and authority has been threatened. You might think a miraculous healing would excite everyone,

But the leader of the synagogue, was indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath.

The leader speaks directly to the crowd and puts the pressure on them to keep the law.

"There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

No work on the sabbath. That's the law. You are not permitted to do anything. No buying, no selling, no building, no repairing, no cleaning, no cooking, no taking your animals for a walk. Nothing. No work at all is allowed. This healing would be considered a form of work.

And according to Luke this leader in the synagogue keeps repeating it:

"There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

Now, there's a rule keeper. To be fair, we are talking about commandment four of the Ten Commandments, the very foundation of Mosaic Law. But my goodness! what an adventure in missing the point. There is a healing, a release from an eighteen year condition, and we are worried about whether the Law has been broken? The Law is more important than the condition of a human being who happens to be seeking God? Is it possible that people might not recognize a move of God even when it is happening in their midst?

And so the battle is on for the heart and soul of the people. The leader of the established religious order is panicked that control is slipping away, and resorts to a law and order argument. This person, apparently, does not believe Jesus is God. An offense has been taken and the controlling power has been threatened. And in a legalistic defense of God, this leader would sooner have this woman remain bent over than freed of her debilitating condition.

The Rebuke

But now the lion has been awakened. The Prophet's voice will no longer stay silent. All through the history of Israel and God's people the prophets had a reputation for speaking truth and unsettling the ones in power. Mary read words from the prophet Jeremiah this morning about Jeremiah's calling from God:

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

When a true prophet of God spoke, the people ignored the word at their peril. The Old Testament contains a long line of prophets who intermediate between God and humanity.

But what they had not heard until this point was the prophetic word of God though the Son of God himself. And on this day that roaring voice has something to say about religion's horrible response to this woman:

"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?"

A daughter of Abraham. Finally, in Jesus, there is someone who recognizes her spiritual heritage; that she too is a child of God. She cannot, and will not, be excluded, she is in the family line of Abraham, whether she belongs in the synagogue or not. Lord knows we make judgments all the time about who belongs and doesn't belong in church. Jesus, because of his compassion, sees her as more important than the rules and he fully restores her to community.

But make no mistake, battle lines are being drawn and this war is shaping up to be Jesus vs. Satan. With the advent of Jesus, God's kingdom has come, and the work of darkness is now being destroyed.

The Reversal

And so, the celebration is on! There is victory in this new upside-down kingdom. The order of things is being reversed. Those who were kept down are now standing up; those who were elevated are now coming down. In his ministry Jesus would face many challenges but:

The entire crowd (that day) was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing, Luke writes, but all his opponents were put to shame.

Jesus identifies the problem when he calls out his challengers as "hypocrites." Play-actors; those who wear a mask. An external form of religion is maintained, but the hidden self behind the mask is a different person and tells a different story. Jesus has a habit of revealing what is behind the mask. It's a painful moment. It's the feeling of shame, and we have all been there. But thankfully for us, even the hypocrites can be redeemed.

The Mission

There's a world out there filled with people who for one reason or another are bent over and crippled by whatever has got them, and they are yearning to be set free. There's a Church that has lost its way at times and is hoping to be renewed and set free. And the good news is Jesus has come for this; to set us free. To proclaim liberty to the captives. To rescue those who have been put on the margins, forgotten, and left behind.

As Christians we are the hands of Jesus Christ. And Jesus' hands were kind hands. Let's look at our hands. Do our hands look like Jesus' hands? Are they doing what he would do? When someone comes in the church will they find compassionate people who look like Jesus or will they find people wearing masks? We are engaged in the ongoing operation of mission work. I believe we are living in the most exciting but challenging times ever, and we must stay focused on the mission. And the mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of a hurting world. Will people find healing in the Church? Will they find true freedom in the Church? In the name of Jesus, and for his sake, may it ever be so. Amen.