

“Blest be the Ties that Bind”

Jeremiah 1: 4-10. Luke 13: 10-17

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The lectionary cycle for year C has introduced us to many women, some named and more unnamed. This morning we meet yet another woman. In today’s gospel lesson, which is unique to Luke; Jesus heals a nameless woman allowing her to stand up straight for the first time in 18 years. This woman did not ask to be healed. She has slipped into the synagogue, unnoticed as she perhaps has done many times before. She is a shadow, a fraction of her former self, shuffling along unable to stand straight to meet your gaze, to see how the world looks at her or more likely how people look away when she enters the room.

Despite her disability she comes faithfully as any other believer would. She knows that people probably wonder why she continues to show herself in public, risking the whispers and gossip and chatter that people share instead of greeting her or showing her the compassion she deserves. People believe that her inability to be healed must be proof of her sinfulness. Perhaps God chooses not to heal her.

This unnamed, hunched-over woman pays no attention to the stares she can not see, the whispers she can not hear, the disgust that flashes unnoticed. She ignores it all because she need to be there, in the presence of the holy, to worship, pray, and to simply be whether it pleases others or not. The spirit brings her there and it is the Spirit that will ultimately transform her life on this unassuming Sabbath day.

I invite you to stand if you are willing and able. For those unable to stand, you may still participate in this exercise. Please lean over 45 degrees to have a sense of this woman’s predicament and perspective. For some of you this leaning over or inability to straighten up is not an exercise, but a reality. As you lean forward, feel the strain on your back, the burden on your shoulders. Then try to look around you from that position to see how being in this position limits your vision of what is in front of you. Your perspective is naturally more limited. Stooping, you can not easily look into the faces of those around you. You can see only their lower bodies, their feet, their legs, but not much more. It is a strain to lift your head enough to even know who is standing next to you. Think of all you might miss if you were permanently stuck in this position. Seeing the world from this perspective is a truly humbling experience. You may all be seated.

Jesus did not get in trouble for simply healing this woman. It is the timing of his healing that draws the Jewish official’s ire. There are rules about “working” on the Sabbath and healing was considered “work.” One may sing or pray or preach even teach on the Sabbath, but laying ones hands upon another person to set them free from an affliction on the Sabbath was not acceptable. If this woman had lived with this infirmity for 18 years could she not live one more day with it? Those who live with chronic back pain, or pain of any sort, know how ridiculous this sounds. I asked you to bend over for only a few minutes and I imagine it was not difficult to feel how uncomfortable this position is.

Imagine how it must have felt living this way day after day, year after year. It is amazing that this woman ever left her house, given the physical and spiritual pain she was in. Yes, it may have been more convenient for her to seek Jesus out on another day, but why on earth should she?

Jesus acts spontaneously, lovingly, compassionately when he sees this woman in pain. She does not approach him. Jesus notices her out of the corner of his eye. He invites her to come forward, into the center of the synagogue where everyone can see her. If she responds she can no longer remain anonymous. If she is healed, people will never again call her “the bent over woman”, but the woman whom Jesus set free in the synagogue. Of course she comes forward, not knowing what exactly will happen next, but hoping against all hope that this will be her moment of freedom.

Walter Wink, in his book “Engaging the Powers,” suggests that Jesus’ actions in today’s reading represented a revolution happening in these seven short verses. He says that in this story, Jesus tries to wake people up to the kind of life God wants for them. Jesus often talks about the kingdom of God where people have equal worth and all of life has dignity—and in this story he acts that message out. In the midst of a highly patriarchal society Jesus breaks at least six strict cultural and religious rules.

First, Jesus speaks to a woman. In those days, Jewish men did not speak to women. This is not the only place where Jesus speaks to a woman. You will remember the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. She is astonished that Jesus not only speaks to her there, but requests to receive a drink of water from her. When Jesus tells his disciples about his encounter with the woman at the well, they are astonished by what he has done. This encounter, witnessed by everyone in the synagogue, may be even more astonishing.

Second, Jesus calls this woman to the center of the synagogue. In doing so, Jesus challenges the notion that only men have access to this central place of worship, power and knowledge. He also dismantles the tradition that says only men have access to God.

Third, Jesus touches this woman, something forbidden under the holiness code.

Fourth, Jesus calls this woman a “daughter of Abraham,” a term Jesus has not used before. This is radical because in that culture people believed women could only be saved through their men. To call this woman a “daughter of Abraham” meant that she was a full-fledged member of the nation of Israel with equal standing before God.

Fifth, Jesus heals this woman on the Sabbath, the holy day. We have already seen the kind of response that elicits. In doing this Jesus shows that God is more concerned with showing compassion to God’s people than upholding ritual or ceremony. If a child of God is suffering, it makes no sense to ignore their suffering simply because it is the Sabbath. We would not ignore one of our livestock if it were hungry or thirsty. How then can you ignore this woman’s obvious discomfort?

And finally, Jesus challenges the ancient belief that this woman's illness is a direct punishment from God for sin. Jesus believes she is ill, not because God willed it, but because there is evil in the world. (From Rev. Richard Fairchild, "That to Which We Have Come," sermon on Luke 13: 10-17, Proper 16/C)

As we have heard, Jesus' healing did not go unnoticed by the Jewish leaders. They understood all these cultural and religious rules and were not happy when Jesus so flagrantly breaks them. Jesus came to teach people that God focuses on people, not rules or commandments. Jesus understood the value and place of rules, but when rules keep us from helping a brother or sister in need or when they divided the community instead of unifying it, then perhaps these rules are meant to be broken. Jesus will err on the side of love and compassion every time when it comes to upholding or breaking a rule or crossing a long held boundary.

The Jewish leaders were upset at Jesus, but it was not the act of healing this woman that angered them so. Jesus was directly challenging their authority by disregarding the rules and traditions of the synagogue. However, instead of chastising Jesus directly, they focus their criticism on the woman. There are six other days to seek healing, they tell her, the worship service is not meant for healing, but for worship. How easily we confuse the two!

This was not merely a spontaneous act of kindness by Jesus. This was one of those teachable moments, where Jesus will now be able to say "do as I do" and point to this particular moment. In this one moment Jesus single-handedly dismantled several traditions and provided the Jewish leaders with mounting evidence against. There is no hemming and hawing or second-guessing here. Jesus does what no one else had been able or perhaps willing to do for 18 years.

Whenever I hear healing stories like this one I have mixed feelings. Part of me always wants to be more like Jesus. Why don't the people who come to our healing service ever walk away with their cancer gone, their Parkinson's vanished, or their anguish over a loved one's death taken away? Regrettably, I am unaware of any such miracles happening at South Church. We have, however, shared the love of God with whoever comes. We have done whatever we could to help others release their burdens, those things that weigh them down and keep them from standing upright. We have reminded folks, some that we have never met before, that they are a child of God and that God intends that they not be defined by this ailment or their feelings or the grief that plagues them. God does not intend for us to be defined by our change in marital status or medical diagnosis. We are instead to be defined by God's love, grace, hope, compassion and mercy toward us.

Jesus teaches us that what is important to God is that we love and care for each other; that all people experience the healing grace of God. To Jesus, God is not primarily a rule-maker, but a life-giver. What I know, but do not always remember, is that I too am a child of God, a daughter of Abraham. Each of us is a child of God too. That does not mean that we are immune from danger or sin or disease. It does however mean that despite all these

things, we can never be beyond God's love or healing grace. You can come up with all the rules you like. You can tell me what I can and cannot do on the Sabbath, but you can never take away God's love for me. Knowing this, we can face anything. May it be so!  
Amen

Sources: Richard Fairchild, "That To Which We Have Come," sermon for Luke 13: 10-17

Mary Hinkle Shore, "Sabbath Freedom," Proper 16/C, Luke 13: 01-17.