

Sermon 08-25-2019

A man tells the story of leaving a grocery store when he was approached by two small boys selling candy bars for their school. The man told the boys, "I'll buy a chocolate bar from you on one condition— you eat it for me." The boys agreed. The man bought the chocolate bar and promptly handed it back to one little boy so that he could eat it. The boy shook his head and said, "I can't." "Why not?" the man asked. The boy looked at him and said, "I'm not supposed to take candy from strangers."

There's someone who knows how to follow the rules. He may not understand why he's not supposed to take candy from a stranger, but he understands obedience to a caregiver who taught him that. It's not a popular subject in our world today, but let's talk for a bit about *obedience*.

You have to believe in a cause greater than yourself to obey a rule or an order that causes you to sacrifice your own pleasure or comfort. Our Gospel reading today is partly about the Sabbath, and what it meant to keep the Sabbath holy. We may not agree with the classic interpretation of keeping the Sabbath, but I suspect all of us admire commitment to faith.

For millennia, now, Jews have kept strict observance of the Sabbath as the Lord's *Day of Rest*. In our reading for today, a synagogue leader signaled Jesus out because he healed a woman on the Sabbath. Work, even the most simple task, was *forbidden* on the Sabbath. Lighting a lamp or a fire, or cooking a meal, was seen as *forbidden* work. Lawyers could not deal with clients, physicians could not treat patients on the Sabbath.

By that understanding, Jesus was certainly breaking the Sabbath when he healed that disabled woman. In synagogues of Jesus' day, there were separate places for men and women: men sat up front; women sat in the back. There was a woman present that day who had been severely disabled for eighteen years. She was bent over and couldn't straighten up at all. Jesus probably had to go out of his way to notice this woman and her condition. If you have any compassion at all or any ability to empathize with another human being, you can't help but hurt for this woman. She was so terribly disabled. But you also have to admire her. She did not allow her physical condition to keep her from worshipping God. Notice how our story begins—

"One Sabbath day, Jesus was teaching in a synagogue. A woman was there who was severely disabled. Her body was all bent over." Even with her pronounced deformity she was in synagogue on the Sabbath. I admire her. I wonder if I would have that kind of courage— to be in public with that kind of condition. Even more important she had not allowed her physical condition to impair her relationship to God. She had been this way for eighteen years— all bent over and unable to stand upright. The pain was probably severe. Yet, her habit was to be at worship to praise her Maker. Friends, that's faith. That's devotion. I know people who will miss church if they have even a slight headache. Or if there is a threat of a little rain— or the threat of sunshine, for that matter. But here was this woman where she was supposed to be on the Sabbath: at worship. And because she was there, she received a very special blessing from God.

Opportunely, Jesus saw her. He called her over and told her she had been set free. Then he touched her, resulting in her instant healing. Immediately the woman started praising God. It was an awesome miracle....except that Jesus did this act of mercy on the Sabbath; and in this synagogue this was certainly not deemed proper.

Jesus must have expected some reaction. It is important to note that Jesus is not lessening the holiness of God by freeing this burdened woman on the Sabbath. In fact,

her healing is an apt Sabbath act. In Deuteronomy 5:15, Moses reminded the people of Israel of God's commands— "*Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.*" What the leader of the synagogue didn't seem to grasp was that setting people free from slavery or from pain and suffering is, in a way, honoring the Sabbath.

You have seen such unfortunate people. You have looked on them as Jesus did. But you most likely do not share the harsh attitude common in Jesus' time— Such affliction was thought to be the result of sin; either hers, or her parents'. She had it coming to her. It was divine judgment. A Jewish version of Hindu *karma*. Stuck fast in the minds of many was the notion that God always rewards the good and punishes the wicked in obvious ways. If misfortune comes to you, it's your own fault. If you are repentant the punishment will stop. If you stay unrepentant the punishment remains. By this version of *karma*, victims of disaster were made victims twice over—they bore the affliction, as well as the scorn of those who were living relatively contented lives. It has echoes in those who blame the unemployed for being unemployed, or the deserted spouse for being deserted, or the refugee for being a refugee. It was—and still is— an overly simplistic doctrine.

Jesus refers to the woman not as a sinner but as a daughter of Abraham, which means "a faithful Jew." He sees the affliction not as a judgment of God but as an evil— "*ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage...?*" How better to honor the Sabbath than to help someone in distress? How better to honor the Sabbath than to give freedom to someone suffering.

God created us in His image, and his plan from the beginning was to free us from the suffering of this world and restore us to his image. God's promise of freedom helps us all overcome the burdens we face in life. Can you imagine the look on the face of the woman who had been bent over for 18 years when Jesus healed her that day in the synagogue?

Setting people free is God's work. Setting people free was Jesus' mission, whether it was freedom from painful disabilities, or freedom from a hurtful past or freedom from sins and anxieties. That is why he came into the world— to set people free. Helping people is what the Sabbath was for. God established the Sabbath, not to bind us with rules, but to remind us of who God is, of who God made us to be, of how God provides for us, and how the people of God will spend eternity sharing in God's eternal Sabbath-rest.

Jesus' words and actions are enough to annoy the leader of the synagogue. He is typical of those for whom rules are more important than concern. It also offended some of the other pious men who were present and watching his every move, so that they could report it. In their judgment, his attitude was dangerous. But wait, there is another offence—He knew what he was doing, all along. He knew his critics were following him. I suppose he could have been discreet and asked the woman to see him privately outside the synagogue, or maybe that evening after sunset, when the Sabbath would have expired. But Jesus? No way.

Jesus cared too much to be quiet. As far as he was concerned, this woman had already suffered too long. Now was the time for compassion. Now was the opportune moment. Now was the hour of liberation. He knew that one more strike and he would be out. Yet none of the retribution that might befall him mattered as much as this person's immediate need. If it meant one more nail ready for the cross, so be it.

This woman, whatever the origin of her infirmity, was at worship on the Sabbath; when Jesus told her to step forward, she obeyed, and this terrible burden was lifted from

her: *“Immediately she straightened up and praised God.”* Immediately after telling us this woman straightened up and praised God, *Luke* tells us—

“Indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, the synagogue leader said to the people, ‘There are six days for work. So come and be healed on those days,...not on the Sabbath.’” Where do people like this come from? They throw cold water on everything. And for some reason they seem to be drawn to the church and synagogue. This fits the reply some fundamentalist neighbors gave when someone asked them where they’d been: “We went away to a Christian camp,” they said, “We were learning how to be more judgmental.”

Here we are in church, our version of the synagogue. Here with us, by his Spirit, is Christ Jesus, unseen but intimately present. This is a place where people may still come for healing and acceptance. This is a place where people may still come to find help for their hurting hearts. This is a place where persons with a disability can find God’s ability to heal. Imagine someone coming in the doors of our church bent over, either figuratively or literally, like this poor woman in today’s reading. Is she going to encounter the spirit of Jesus or is she going to encounter the spirit of that synagogue leader? The answer to that question is up to each and everyone of us. Will they discover here a spirit that heals or one that hurts?

Let’s make certain that we are a church family that always seeks to heal— a church family that surrounds people with the love and grace of God.