

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 16, August 25, 2019
Isaiah 58:9b-14, Psalm 103:1-8, Hebrews 12:18-29, Luke 13:10-17
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I must admit, that having been a priest in several congregations, I have some empathy for the leader of the synagogue. He is not a bad person. He repeatedly reminds the crowds that there were 6 days for work and that the Sabbath should be observed according to the Law of Moses, according to the rules. Healing is work and after all, if the woman has been unwell for 18 years what difference would one day make? The beautiful liturgy, designed to draw the people closer to God was being disrupted in what seemed to him an unnecessary way. The age-old tradition of sabbath rest, a tradition designed to give people time to discover their love of God and God's love for them, that tradition was being violated. And, the leader of the synagogue has lost a measure of control, a bit of authority in what is happening around him.

Jesus is a rabbi, a teacher and he is teaching in the synagogue, the holy place, teaching the law and the prophets. He is a part of the institution. He should be obeying the Law that he is teaching. But, as we all know, Jesus was a rule breaker when what was at issue was the more basic commandment to love God and love neighbor.

A woman appears with a spirit that had crippled her for 18 years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. This spirit, which was causing the infirmity is more aptly described as a spirit of weakness. We can assume that she is a woman of faith, of prayer, a daughter of Abraham. She did not come seeking Jesus or healing, she came because it was her custom to do so. She came not expecting any change in her circumstances. She was resigned to her fate.

What was weighing her down was not necessarily physical, being bent over was a symptom rather than the illness itself. She is described by Jesus as someone "... whom Satan has bound...". There is something that has been separating her from joy and full life, from the life God wants for her. What gave Satan the power over this woman? We cannot know the specifics, but whatever it was, it separated her from God.

Jesus was teaching and he sees the woman, in the distance. He has a decision to make. Will he ignore the woman, and stay within the bounds of Sabbath law, or will he violate the law and pay homage to the greater law of love? Which is truly loving God, and loving neighbor? This is a difficult decision, a decision not without consequences.

Jesus calls the woman over, and says "Woman you are free from your ailment." That is step one in the healing process in this story. She was free from that which caused her to walk bent over. But apparently the physical symptoms remained. In step two of the healing process, Jesus "laid his hands on her". Remember, this is a Rabbi in the synagogue who has already contravened the sabbath laws by talking to a woman, and by setting her free from her ailment. He goes further, he lays his hands on her. Jewish men did not touch women who were not members of their immediate family. In addition, since she needed healing, she was "unclean". According to the purity laws, uncleanness was transferred to others by touch. This is not a

simple healing. By touching the woman Jesus is symbolically declaring her able to rejoin the community. Jesus is welcoming her back. Notice her reaction. She immediately stands up straight and begins praising God. The ailment had already been treated with the earlier command of Jesus. "Woman, you are set free of your ailment." What healed the woman was the act of welcome back into fellowship with the members of the synagogue. Now the question for her is how will she live into her healing. She has lived with being bent over, with limited ability and now she has been released. All seems possible, how will she live into this new reality? For that is what healing does for us, makes it possible for us to live into a new reality.

No wonder the leader of the synagogue was indignant. We should not judge him harshly. Much of what he was responsible for protecting was being destroyed at least in that moment. Have you ever been in the position of having something that you held dear be set aside for what was deemed a greater good?

Look a bit more closely to the woman in the story. She has an unidentified ailment. What the specific diagnosis might have been is less important than the symptoms of the disease. She is bent over, unable to stand up straight. That means for eighteen years she has been unable look straight ahead, or to the side without turning her whole body and peering up. She has been confined to looking at the ground, the dust and dirt of the road. She has been unable to see the sky, the sun, the stars. She has been unable to see the glory of creation. No wonder, upon being able to see more than what is right under her feet, she began to praise God. It must have felt like being reborn. She felt the love of God through Jesus in her healing. Have you ever been in the same kind of position, at least symbolically, as this woman? Have you been in a place in your life where you could only see the ground, where there seemed to be no future, no hope, no promise?

Isaiah was addressing a similar situation as he spoke the words God had given him to the people in Jerusalem. Cyrus, the Persian ruler had allowed the Jews who had been in exile to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their lives and their Temple. But the place to which they were returning was not unoccupied. There were people, Jews, there who had never gone into exile, who had never left. When the two groups met, what developed was a community in conflict. Both knew that God was calling them to restore the Temple, Jerusalem and to be obedient to the Covenant. The problem was that there was not agreement on how this could or should be accomplished. It was a time when the possession of the land was at stake. A time when theological and religious issues were being settled. When decades before, the Babylonians had carried off the majority of the people of Jerusalem and Judah, it seemed that God had abandoned them. Now they saw that with the return of the exiles they had a second chance. They did not want to make a mistake, the rewards were priceless, a new beginning with God. What was being formed was the future of the people. Where was God in all of this? What was the future that was on the horizon?

One faction held that the Temple was the most important piece of work to be done. Another group was sure that God wanted the rebuilding of their lives. They were a vulnerable

and disoriented, leaderless band. Because they were seeking God's plan, God's will, they prayed and God answered their prayer through the voice of Isaiah.

God's promises were articulated in action and consequence style. If you do...then God will do. "If you remove the yolk from among you..." What was this yoke to be removed? The division of the people, the accusations that one group was right and the other was wrong. The unwillingness to work together and to allow for differences. Not unlike the yoke of the woman in the gospel. She could see nothing but what was at her feet until she was healed. Neither party in the Jerusalem dispute could see the other's side. They were yoked together in division.

God promised the people in Jerusalem that if they removed the yoke that held them God would satisfy their needs and guide them continually. If they would but allow it, if they would trust God, they would be able to rebuild the temple, the city and their lives. If they would listen to God, they would find freedom and release from that which held them in disunity.

God's second promise was that if they would refrain from trampling the sabbath they would find joy, and peace. But what did "trampling the sabbath" mean? Much like in our Gospel this morning, trampling the sabbath meant letting the traditions and laws take precedence over the needs of the human beings. God was calling them to love God by loving neighbor and that would bring them justice, joy, and peace. Removing the yoke that bound them and truly honoring God in the sabbath would turn them from a vulnerable, disoriented group into a community. Removing the yoke that bound them and truly honoring the sabbath would save them.

Martin Buber, a contemporary Jewish scholar describes salvation not as "...a state of bliss, but as the constancy of the dialogical relationship between God and man" (sic). A dialogical relationship between God and human beings, is an elegant way of saying that we talk to God and God answers us. It is in this dialogue, this relationship that we are changed and that the community is healed. In this relationship of conversation and action between God and humans, we are saved in real time, here and now. God's ways of saving us are not limited, but multifaceted according to our needs.

The prophet's words echoed across the years to that moment in the synagogue when an ailing woman came into the presence of Jesus. In the moments that followed, what came together was the purpose of God. The same purpose of God which we hear this day.

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? He {Jesus} said to him, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matt: 22:36-38).