

The 11th Sunday after Pentecost-Proper 16-Year C-The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 8.21. 2022
Isaiah 58: 9b-14, Psalm 103:108, Hebrews 12: 18-29, Luke 13: 10-17

It would be easy to dismiss today's Gospel with a "ho hum, just another story about Jesus healing someone who was in need. They are all the same. Jesus sees someone with a seemingly hopeless case and responds by healing them. The person gives thanks to God, the crowd is amazed and for the moment rejoices in the wonderful things Jesus does for them. And.... someone takes exception to the miracle because it is done at the wrong time, in the wrong way, to the wrong person. The pattern is the same and we've heard it all before, nothing to do with us, oh hum... To think that would be a mistake.

Have you ever asked yourself why Jesus so often healed those in need? Why is healing such a large part of the ministry of Jesus and later of the disciples? After all, the principal reason Jesus was sent was to announce the kingdom of God and to bring people into that kingdom. Jesus came to change the world. Healing was not the primary focus. Let me say it again. A careful reading of the scriptures shows us that Jesus came to proclaim that the Kingdom of God was at hand, here and now, available to everyone. Yet time and again, Jesus heals before proclaiming the Kingdom. Of course, Jesus was compassionate and when someone was in need he would respond to that need, with healing, food, forgiveness. But there is more to this. The Kingdom cannot fully come in the midst of distress. It is the mission and ministry of Christians to continue to heal distress, in whatever form, wherever they find it.

So, what can we learn by examining this specific healing story, the story of the woman crippled for 18 long years? Can we see the woman in the story as a symbol or a representative of our whole congregation in this moment in time? These are two different but interconnected things. A congregation is made up of individual people, a community who chooses to be bound together in ministry. But ask yourselves what does it mean to be a part of such a community of faith and ministry? The story of the healing of the woman in our Gospel may help us answer that question.

Jesus is teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath, a usual task for a young rabbi. Nothing unusual about that. A woman comes into the synagogue, presumably to worship. Jesus catching sight of her, notices that she is bent over, crippled with what we might imagine is severe osteoporosis. We learn that this has been the case for 18 years. As we talk about what happens next remember that she represents both the congregation and each of us individually. The woman does not ask to be healed. No one asks on her behalf that she receive healing. No one seems to think that it is a possibility. Things have always been like this. The woman is accustomed to her lot in life, maybe even resigned thinking that nothing can change, thinking that she can do nothing to change her situation.

We've all been in this place, where seemingly the situation is hopeless or at least too big for one person to change. "I can't bring about world peace so...what can I possibly do." I can seek peace with those around me. I may not be always successful but like a pebble dropped in a calm pool, there is a ripple effect. I can do something when I find distress in the world. If I do nothing that pebble never has the chance to set in motion the ripple.

Have we asked God to change a specific situation? Are we afraid to do so because God might say yes and tell us that we are to bring about the change in that situation? We are told that we have only to ask and we will receive, the catch is we may not receive in the way we envision.

The woman in our story may not have asked because she did not want to contemplate the change that healing might entail. A change in her physical appearance might change her whole life. The way people look at her. The things people expect of her.

Imagine for a bit what not asking entails for her. The woman is bent over to such an extent that she cannot see the sun, stars, or mountains in the distance. She cannot easily see the trees, flowers in the fields. She is deprived of beauty. This woman must turn her head from side to side to see what we easily see by simply shifting our eyes. She is limited not only in how she sees the world but in how she can respond to it. Her disability binds her and she is not free.

This nameless woman has lived this way for 18 years, she is resigned. Others are used to seeing her in this state and do not question it. Many think it is a punishment for somehow offending God. No one thinks that things can change. When Jesus heals her, Jesus is criticized because it is the sabbath the wrong day for healing. There are complaints that this is the wrong thing to do, the wrong method, that what he has done has upset the people of the synagogue because it is not according to the rules. Lest you miss this point, I want to read a portion of the gospel again. "But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the sabbath kept saying to the crowd; 'There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days to be healed...'" Kept saying to the crowd. The leader kept the controversy alive.

Moreover, he said it not to Jesus who was the healer, but to the crowd. Why? To stir up more controversy and drama? To feel in control? To regain power that he felt he had lost or maybe simply because he could? Jesus answer was simple. It is always the right time and place to set people free from whatever binds them.

The opponents, we are told, felt shame, the crowd rejoiced and the woman praised God. A nice ending, but it is not the end of the story or at least not the end of the lessons for us in this story. We do not know what came next for the woman, the leader of the synagogue or the individuals in the crowd.

Imagine what this story means for us as a congregation. Imagine what might come next. If we put ourselves into the story, we have much to learn. As a congregation we will again and again in our lives be presented with this same story. There is something that seems in need of healing but at the same time seems impossible. We are accustomed or resigned to the way things are. We think we can do nothing. But then, if we listen carefully, prayerfully, we might hear the voice of Jesus calling us. Calling us as he called to the woman, to participate in healing and we respond. Someone or some situation is longing to be unbound and set free. We then in the manner of Jesus lay our hands on the situation and healing begins. Whatever the issue in need of healing, physical, social or spiritual, we put our hands to work to be the agents of the healing touch. All ministry, large and small comes about because someone, some two or three hear the call of God and responds with actions that heal.

And then may come the opposition. Those who do not want to embrace the change, those who for whatever reason fear the unknown. And so there is opposition but those opposed can perhaps be won over to a new way of being. It is well to persevere, sure that if it is of God, it will be blessed. Listen to the opposition for they too are part of the kingdom. Out of all of this can come wonderful new things that we are called to do.

Out of a simple story of healing for a woman long in pain comes a model for the life of a parish moving into a new way of ministry and a new way of being. You are in that moment of being called by Jesus to heal whatever is dis-eased around you. What will be the healing that needs

to come about so that the kingdom of God may come more fully into each life and into this place. If we listen carefully, prayerfully, we will know.