

“Set Free”

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Luke 13:10-17

When we look back on the situation from all of these years later, it really seems they should have seen this coming. Jesus had told them what he was about. In Luke 4, Jesus goes to the synagogue, unrolls the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and reads this: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” That passage was the appointed Lectionary Gospel text in January of this year, and we then talked about how this was essentially a “mission statement” for Jesus’ ministry. Jesus was about good news for the poor, release for the captives, recovery of sight for the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. Surely, this woman was oppressed. She had been crippled for 18 years, bent over and unable to stand up straight. Can you imagine this? For eighteen long years, all she could see was the area around her feet. There are certain eye surgeries which require what they call “face down recovery.” One member of our congregation is going through this right now. During the recovery period, he has to keep his face pointed down toward the ground. Perhaps others of you have had a procedure requiring this type of recovery, so you’ve got an idea of what it is like to only be able to look at the ground for a little while. Eighteen years, though? Probably not. Perhaps others in our congregation have different physical ailments which do not allow them to stand straight, and those might have lasted for many years, so you have an idea what this woman experienced. She had such a limited physical view of the world, never able to look someone in the eye, never able to share the view of what was going on in the synagogue, never able to look at a sunrise or sunset, never able to watch a child at play. Her view of the world was so limited, and this doesn’t begin to discuss the physical pain she must have experienced. While there are certainly worse maladies than hers, this woman was surely in need of freedom from this ailment, a condition which also ostracized her from the community. In that time and culture, physical ailments were generally thought to have a spiritual component; think of the passage from John when Jesus is asked who had sinned that a man was born blind. This particular ailment is even specifically mentioned to have spiritual origins, thus she would have been declared unclean and separated from her community. Yes, this woman needed to be set free!

Yet, she did not seek freedom; she did not seek healing. Perhaps she had just grown accustomed to this state, for these long eighteen years not being able to see or be seen, but Jesus saw her. Jesus saw her need to be set free, and he called her to come to where he was. This is what seems like a minor detail, one we might skim past, or even wonder why Jesus did not go to her. After all, she was hunched over; surely getting to where Jesus was would be harder for her to do than for Jesus to come to where she was. However, we need to remember the status of women in that day. The women would all be at the back of the room, not allowed to speak, not truly able

to participate in the worship going on ahead of them. This woman, declared unclean, would be at the back of even the group of women. Jesus, however, was teaching in the synagogue this day, so he would be front and center. From up front in the place of honor, Jesus saw way to the back of the synagogue, seeing this woman in need, and he called her to come forward to where he was, to the place of honor. She moved, ever so slowly, from her place in the very back, past the women, past the men, to the very front. Every eye must have been trained on her. Who is *she*, why is Jesus calling *her* forward, why is he speaking with this woman whom everyone else ignored? Jesus then does the unthinkable, laying his hands on this ritually unclean woman – a Jewish man would never touch a woman who was not his wife or relative in public, and *certainly* not one who was unclean – and yet Jesus did so. He declared that she was set free, and she was! She stood up straight – something she could not do for eighteen long years – and her immediate response was to praise God! There she stood, in front of the men, in front of the women, in the place of honor, praising God. They should have seen this coming, but they did not, and now they have a problem.

The leader of the synagogue doesn't know what to do. He doesn't want to directly call out Jesus, through whom the power of God has just worked mightily. He doesn't want to directly call out this woman, newly freed from her ailment and praising God. Instead, he gives a generic admonition to the crowd – as The Message paraphrase has it, “Six days have been defined as work days. Come on one of the six if you want to be healed, but not on the seventh, the Sabbath.” There's no indication this woman came seeking healing this Sabbath day, but the leader of the synagogue wants to make sure nobody gets any big ideas. His issue, however, is probably larger than just that this happened on the Sabbath. This is about his loss of control; not just of the worship service on this day which Jesus has so thoroughly disrupted, but of the control of the culture as he knew it. Had Jesus really just invited this unclean *woman* to the front, where only the religious leaders should be? Jesus didn't seem to care about what the leader of the synagogue cared about – keeping everyone in their place, namely the back of the room for this woman. Jesus even called her a “daughter of Abraham,” seemingly giving her a level of importance rivaling the men, the “sons of Abraham.” Just who does this Jesus think he is?

This is about much more than whether this woman should be healed on the Sabbath. I am sure the synagogue leader objected to that, but this was not the only barrier Jesus was breaking down. This had to be stopped, and perhaps the way to stop Jesus was through the people, and so he tells them not to come for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus shoots down this argument, however, calling out the hypocrisy of untying and leading an animal to water on the Sabbath, while ignoring the needs of a person. They have unintentionally elevated the needs of a donkey above the needs of a human being. Jesus' argument is persuasive with the crowd, though not so with the leaders.

We see here the division Pastor Chuck discussed from last week's passage. Luke tells us that the “entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.” Meanwhile, the leaders were “put to shame.” Or, as The Message paraphrase puts it, “his critics were left looking quite silly and red-faced. The congregation was delighted and cheered him on.” There is both joy and outrage at Jesus this day, making clear the division inherent. The synagogue leader is not a bad person – he is simply trying to follow God the best way he knows how, following the

rules handed down to him over centuries. In so doing, however, he misses the new thing that God is doing through Jesus, and so the division grows.

The commandment about Sabbath observance is good. It is good for us to rest from our labors and spend time in worship of God. However, when the commandment is taken to the level that one complains that someone was set free from an eighteen-year malady, then the enforcement of the rule is being lifted above its purpose. God's perspective is much larger than ours, and it is hard to imagine God being upset that someone was healed, even though it was done on the Sabbath. We must understand the purpose behind the commandments and not just rigidly enforce the commandments for their own sake.

So, where do we find ourselves? I think we will find ourselves in different characters at different times. At times, we are the religious leader, doing our best to stay faithful, but missing the forest for the trees. When we find ourselves here, then we must strive to enlarge our vision, to seek to do all things in love in fulfillment of our calling as children of God. Other times, we are the crowd – a bit fickle in our response to someone's coming forward to be set free. We aren't so sure that they "deserve" it, as if it is our place to determine someone's worthiness. And yet, after they are set free, we rejoice with them. When we find ourselves here – witnesses to the suffering of another – we must help them to make it to where Jesus is calling them so that they may be set free. And at times, we are the ones who are unable to stand up straight. We are unable to lift our heads to look around, and instead can only see the dust beneath our feet. Sometimes, this is a situation of our own making – we prefer in some ways to not lift our heads. Other times, the cause of our affliction comes from elsewhere. Either way, we need to steadfastly seek the freedom offered in Jesus Christ, who longs to set all of us free. We are all sons and daughters of Abraham, heirs of the covenant, children of the living God. We are called to see this truth in each other, as we jointly work toward each child of God being set free to stand tall and praise our living, loving God. Amen.