

August 21, 2022
Hebrews 12:18-29
Luke 13:10-17

Straightening Out Worship

Luke 13:10-17

10Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. 11And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. 12When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." 13When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. 14But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." 15But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? 16And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" 17When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Eighteen years. That's how long the woman's body had been crippled.

For eighteen years; she had been stooped and bent; unable to stand up.

Unable to lift her head and pull her shoulders back. Unable to take a deep breath or relax her jaw or stretch her neck. Unable to look up at the moon or stars, unable to look anyone in the eye. She was trapped in her body that was folded in itself, imprisoned by her failing bones and muscles.

Eighteen years is a long time. It was a long time to be in that condition.

It was long enough to get used to it. Long enough time to learn how to adapt. In eighteen years, I imagine she had learned how to get around the best she could. How to walk. How to eat, how to dress, how to clean her

house, how to work, how to shop. She had learned to get someone's attention when she needed something. And how to deflect someone's pity. I imagine that in 18 years you learn how to handle the pain. The neck pain, the back pain, the pain in your head and your jaw; the difficulty of breathing while you are doubled over, the tightness in your chest from your heart laboring to beat sideways: the frustration, the helplessness, the anger. It's been 18 years. But this is how life is. With no cure or relief in sight.

Eighteen years was enough time for this woman to get used to her condition. It was time enough for those around her to get used to it too. It was time enough for them to accept her fate. And for two generations to grow up knowing her as the crippled lady. For people to feel sorry for her and then move on. For them to know that there was nothing anyone could do and this is how things would be for her; and she must learn to deal with it herself. Eighteen years was a long enough to learn to overlook the woman.

And so, life moved on. It moved on past the bent woman. She couldn't lift her head to watch it. She couldn't raise her chin and be seen and

acknowledged. We don't know her. She has no name in this story and therefore, no identity. Maybe you know what that's like, to be overlooked. To be bent low by a disease, to be nameless and faceless because of a condition. Maybe you know what it's like to be left behind. To have people look past you.

This woman with no name comes to the synagogue on the Sabbath. She has come with everyone else to see Jesus. They have all come to hear him talk about the kingdom of God and its promises for them. The bent woman can't she really see Jesus. Not with her back bent the way it is. But she can hear him. She can still hear his words about God's mercy and God's presence that was available to everyone. She could pray what she had always prayed for, for 18 years, that God would look at her; and see her and have mercy on her. And when she comes into the synagogue, Jesus sees her right away. Even though she cannot see him, he sees her and immediately, he calls her over and says to her without any prelude or introduction: "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." He lays his hands upon her and instantly, her back relaxes, her bones straighten.

She is able to stand up and take a deep breath, and be free of her paralysis.

Imagine it. Imagine the wonder and the surprise in the synagogue.

Imagine people exclaiming to one another: Did you see that? Did you see what Jesus did? He healed the crippled woman, the one bound up for 18 years! Praise God! Glory be to God. Thank you God! It is a moment of worship. That's what worship is, when we look and see what God has done and we are amazed and grateful. Everyone is in awe. Well, everyone, but the synagogue leader. He objects to all this. He condemns what has happened. He shakes his finger at them, scolding them for doing this, on the Sabbath. "There are six other days of the week for healing," he says. "Come on those days and be cured."

This was not the day for a woman crippled for 18 years to be healed.

According to the synagogue leader, straightening this woman and restoring her was not right. It was wrong. There is a time and place for these things, but this is not the time and place. For God to heal someone was labor. And God should not labor on the sabbath. She could have

waited. If she had waited for 18 years; she could have waited one day more. Jesus could have waited one day more.

This was how the synagogue leader interpreted the law. God's commandments. The Sabbath was part of the covenant God made with God's people. It was on the list Moses had brought down from Mt Sinai.

#1 You shall worship only God. #2 You shall make no idols for yourselves. #3 You shall not abuse God's holy name. #4 You shall remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Remember the Sabbath! "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but The Seventh day is a Sabbath day to the Lord your God. In six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it."

The Sabbath was a holy day, consecrated by. There was to be no work. Not even work done by God. That meant no miracles. No healings, according to the synagogue leader. No curing women crippled for 18 years. He was trying to protect God. Trying to keep things orderly.

Trying to guard the holy things and avoid God's wrath and condemnation. He feared being wrong, just like we do. He feared the

risk of it. It all seemed too disruptive and dangerous. Better safer than sorry. Better to make someone wait for a better time, a right time, a more appropriate time for a miracle of healing.

The synagogue leader wanted God's grace to be decent and orderly. He wanted God's mercy should be predictable and controllable. We humans like that kind of thing. It was one of the arguments used in the 1860s to support slavery. It was in the Bible, people said. And besides, if people wait, it would end on its own. It was the same excuse people used in the 1900s to refuse women the right to vote, saying it wasn't in the Bible and that they should wait because it would destroy their families. It's the same excuse people made in the 1960s to back away from civil rights legislation, because things would change eventually and separate but equal was fine, wasn't it? Christians shouldn't get involved. Even though the people around us are bent down by their burdens; spirits that cripple them. They can't stand up straight or look anyone in the eye. Oh no, it's the Sabbath. Deal with this on someone else's time; not on God's time.

But Jesus tells us today that the Sabbath is a day for healing. It is the time for people to be free. It's not religious rules and commandments that give us freedom, but the compassion and justice of God behind them. Mercy is God's law, Jesus says. Restoration and redemption. God's judgment isn't for those unfaithful to the law, but unfaithful to love. God's wrath is for those who look are indifferent to their neighbor. Who look past them and their suffering. Jesus does not look past the woman who has been crippled for 18 years. He sees her and knows that THIS day must be her Sabbath day. She needs rest. She needs release from the yoke of her pain. She needs to be able to stand up and breathe free and look everyone in the eye once again. And look God in the eye. And see that God wants her to have Sabbath rest too.

The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. God's commandments were made for us, not us for the commandments. And God wants us to have rest and good, full lives. No one should spend their lives doubled over by the weight of hardship and labor. No one should be crippled by shame or overwhelming busyness or the need to prove their worth. God has created all of us to stand up straight, to inhale

and exhale, and look one another in the eye. To be free of oppression. And to praise God and give thanks for what God has done. To be delighted in God's compassion and mercy. And to not let our religion take the place of our humanity. Jesus tells the synagogue leader that he has it all wrong. "You have enough sense, Jesus says, to care for your work animals on the Sabbath. Have enough sense to care for the human beings around you too."

The Sabbath is there to give us a break from back-breaking labor. It is for relaxing into God's grace and rejoicing in God's promises. It is not for turning God's promises into heavy stones to carry around or to load onto the backs of others or to sling at our enemies. God's promises and God's commandments are for our freedom. God's kingdom will set things right. And God's Sabbath is for straightening us out and helping us to stand. So that we may look one another in the eye and see one another. And behold the face of God.

The woman in our story, starts with no name. But by the end, she has a name. She has been seen and identified. Jesus calls her a daughter of Abraham, an heir to God's family fortune. And everyone there must see

her that way too. She deserves God's blessing. She deserves her freedom. She has waited long enough. Eighteen years is enough. This is the day the Lord has made, so she can rejoice and be glad in it.

This is God's promise, God's covenant with us. That's for freedom we have been set free. That healing from God isn't just for our bodies, but for our spirits too. That love is the law. That compassion is what the commandments are about. It is why the kingdom of God has come. To bring healing and wholeness. To straighten things out. To relieve the ones struggling with crippling spirits. To unbind those weighed down by the past. Those shouldering the burdens of discrimination. Poverty. Addiction. Those ignored and dismissed and told to come back later. Labeled unworthy of God's attention. Those who can't look anyone in the eye. Who are ones that needs to be brought into the presence of Jesus? Who needs a Sabbath in order to be uncrumpled and unbent? Who has gone on so long, overlooked and unnoticed for such a long time. Maybe it's you. Maybe it's your neighbor. Maybe someone you see every day.

And maybe the time for that Sabbath is today. Today, Jesus wants you to stand up straight. He wants to remove what cripples you, whatever holds you in bondage. He wants to lift your head, and throw your shoulders back and look you in the eye, and call you a son or daughter of God's promise. So you can praise God and rejoice in the wonderful things that God does.