



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick
11th Sunday after Pentecost: August 25, 2019
Sermon Title: "Bent Down No More"
Gospel Text: Luke 13:10-17

I once crossed paths with a man who was diabetic, and he'd had a reaction to a medication that left him both legally blind and with failing kidneys. He needed dialysis three times a week. He couldn't drive. He had a lot of needs, needs that weren't going to just get fixed- they were constants in his world. When a thing like a common cold came his way, it was a totally upending event that usually put him in the hospital where they had to coordinate his underlying ongoing care needs with his new needs. The thing that was really frustrating for him in all of it was that because people couldn't make eye contact with him, they couldn't see him. There was no connection. It was demoralizing. It changed how people interacted with him in every way. When he was in the hospital, medical personnel would come into the room and do things without first placing a hand on his shoulder to get his attention. They would talk about him, in his presence, as if because he could not see, he also could not hear. If he got frustrated, he was difficult. He had once been a pharmacist, but when he would try to talk with them about his meds, they treated him as if being unable to see made him unintelligent. And since he couldn't just be "easy and fixable," and he wouldn't just go away, many people abandoned him, ignored him, judged his situation for what he had done wrong, or pontificated as to what he should do differently. Still others would "pity" him- "look at him," as they shook their heads, while never in tending to actually connect with him. He had a spirit of infirmity, of being unwell that went beyond just the physical into the emotional, and the spiritual. His whole being suffered not only from his illness, but from sin at work in others and the way he was treated.

The woman in the gospel would completely get that. In Jesus' day, women were already seen as feeble and weak. A bent back was synonymous with "lesser character." She was in sight, but no one took time to see her. In fact, they were more likely to see and care for a barnyard animal. This was her life for eighteen years. For 936 sabbaths before the one where she meets Jesus. For 5616 "other days for healing" that had come and gone while she has been in this village and in this synagogue, and in their presence, and yet her body, her mind and her spirit have been un-cared for. Imagine the weight of that- no wonder she is bent over. When one translation of this gospel says she has a spirit of infirmity, maybe now we see.

Jesus sees her. He liberates her- first by actually noticing her, he liberating her from being the “unseen.” Then he liberates her from the margins though many might want to keep her there. He calls her into the center with him. Then he liberates her from being untouchable. Can you imagine what the sense of a compassionate hand on her shoulder broke open- to be no longer starved for contact? By the time she stands up straight and can actually see and be seen, it must have been nothing short of exhilarating!

When she praises God I imagine a song riding up within her and breaking forth that has been dormant for far too long- like the song Miriam sings with her tambourine when the Israelites have escaped slavery and crossed through the Red Sea toward a new and promised life. How on earth could this be anything but joyous good news?!

Yet the religious leader of the synagogue sees it differently. He is upset and I imagine him coming over waving his hands in the air and pointing a finger- “This is NOT what Sabbath worship is about. We don’t work on the Sabbath; we don’t even lift a finger. Don’t do this here now.”

God gave the people of Israel who had been liberated from slavery ten laws, we call commandments, including keeping the Sabbath. But until everyone was done figuring out how exactly to interpret them, there were 631 laws. Keeping all of those sounds like...work. Back breaking at that. And those laws had shifted the focus from being about time to being about space. “There are six other days for you to be here” is about space- and who can be seen, acknowledged, and cared for or not.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, in his book, *The Sabbath*, notes:

“To gain control of the world of space is certainly one of our tasks. The danger begins when, in gaining power in the realm of space, we forfeit all aspirations in the realm of time. There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have, but to be, not to own, but to give, not to control, but to share, no to subdue, but to be in accord.” That realm of time is the Sabbath. “Life goes wrong when the control of space becomes our sole concern.”

On any day, any one could have in some way alleviated this woman’s plight. And no one has. The leader is actually embarrassed that he has been called out for making the Sabbath about human space, and not God’s time. As one poet writes, “he is breaking into a sweat trying to bend the Sabbath and the woman back into place. But she stood up straight and let God’s glory touch her face.” (Irene Zimmerman, “Woman Un-Bent”)

You see, the other liberation Jesus is breaking open is to remember what the Sabbath is really about. Because if we tell the story, and sing the songs, but root it as only being history, how does the kingdom of God break through now?_For Jesus in Luke, it is not only a continuation of the bringing of good news to the poor, it is freedom from all that oppresses or binds.

Miriam's song on the dry land is also the song of Mary's Magnificat. Jesus recalls Deuteronomy, reclaiming and reconnecting Sabbath rest as holy time- as the time of liberation from slavery to serve our God who acts in time to bring freedom. Sabbath is a time of liberation for all. The point of our gathering is spending this time with our Lord of this Sabbath. To celebrate and also to continue to enact liberation. The other six days a week, though we may go many places, are a journey to Sabbath again and again.

If you have come here this day feeling low and weighed down, may you be lifted by our Sabbath together. And for those of us who are feeling strong, may you remember there is never a bad time for restoring those who are seen as insignificant, oppressed or neglected, and lifting up those who feel broken and unloved. This is still our song. The song given to us by a God whose heart says people should not spend even one more day enslaved to what weighs them down and traps them. God's will is always to heal all creation.

Our holy time is about reconnecting and reclaiming God's work in this way in creation and redemption. Our time in God's time should shape how we move in the space of God's creation. Sometimes Jesus will show up, as he often says, at an unexpected hour, but God's time and will are not bound up in our sense of propriety or even our most well intended practices. In this time, may we see that we are in the presence of a God of love. Claimed and called to our Lord's side and touched by grace. Invited into this celebration of liberation. So that we who pray for all in need, remember we are called to turn our prayers into actions so all may stand up with a spirit of rejoicing and be bent down no more.