

Year C, 14th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 16c

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Luke 13:10-17

The Day the Clouds Cleared for a Moment

It was the Sabbath and Jesus is in the synagogue teaching. “A woman was there who had been disabled by a spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and couldn’t stand up straight.” I can picture her. A thousand pictures of women bearing huge bundles of sticks back to their homes to burn in their small fires, of girls carrying water from distant wells through hot and dangerous terrain, of somber mothers working two or three jobs in desperate attempts to provide for their children converge in my mind to form a picture of her.

A disabling spirit has attacked her sense of worth. It bent her over with heavy burdens and she finds it’s impossible to stand up straight. What is a disabling spirit? Could a disabling spirit be what everybody thinks is true but it really isn’t? This woman thinks she is of no value because no one sees her as having any. We are formed by how the other sees us. Everywhere she looks her worthlessness is confirmed.

But Jesus saw her, called her to him and said “woman, you are set free from your sickness.” He took the initiative. He touched her and she stood tall and praised God. His touch had more power than the old spirit that had oppressed her for eighteen years. Jesus sees her through his eyes formed by the kingdom of God. He can value her as a daughter of Abraham and do this in a culture totally blind to her. Now she knows she has value no matter what the community thinks. She has been set free of her sickness that was really the community’s sickness all along.

The scene shifts to the synagogue leader. He is incensed that Jesus healed on the Sabbath. Do you really think he cares about the day of the week or is he more concerned that Jesus upstaged him by doing something really wonderful?

The leader is in rivalry with Jesus, sees him as a threat and decides to relate to him as an enemy. He upbraids Jesus for doing work on the Sabbath. Ah, I suspect the issue isn’t the Sabbath. No, it’s just that the religious leader can’t say “I hate you Jesus because you have just made me look bad and threatened my power base here at the synagogue.” He doesn’t care about this woman bent down and suffering for eighteen years. He thinks, “You can tell who God has blessed and who God hasn’t by noting who is sick and in poverty and who has the goods and the respect of the community. I’m the synagogue leader because I worked for it, exercised good judgment and kept God’s rules. Jesus, don’t you come along with your so-called compassion and mess that up.”

But of course, he can't say that, it doesn't even run through his head as a train of thought because those are the kinds of things he can't admit, even to himself. So he short circuits it and out comes "There are six days during which work is permitted. Come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath day."

"The Lord replied, 'Hypocrites!'" He uses the plural. I wonder who he is thinking of besides the leader. Hypocrites say one thing and do another. They don't see the connection between their words and their actions. For a second week in a row we ask what can't they see?

They treat their livestock better than this woman. The woman and the animals are both in bondage but they make sure the animals are watered even on the Sabbath. Why do they have no problem untying the animals but vigorously resist untying their sister? Could it be that she is their measuring stick telling them who they are, whereas their livestock are just livestock--dumb animals with no meaning.

She has meaning. She is a fellow human and they are all players on the human stage. Where she stands on the stage has implications for where they stand. Who people think she is impacts how people see them. They need her to be bent so that they can be seen as blessed and deserving. That she is a child of God just like them does not factor in their reckoning. They don't really want her to get well.

This woman is vital to the synagogue leader's identity and all the others who see themselves as especially deserving. They have a relationship with her that is powerfully colored by where they stand in their community. The whole structure isn't about God and keeping God happy, it's about people knowing their place and staying in it.

The text now introduces a surprise. It seems the woman has been bound by Satan. Satan throughout the New Testament is the accuser. Could Satan be a stand-in for the accusing community who says "You are just a woman. You were born to carry this burden. Don't try to escape it." Does this story have application for any person or group of people our culture asks to carry its' burdens; to be the ones in whom we store our resentments and who absorb our dysfunction?

In this story from Luke Jesus comes along and sees a woman bent by her culture. Jesus decides to set her free. Jesus has asked us to model ourselves after him. When we see someone bent, or perhaps a whole population bent, shaped by the weight they are carrying even though it is not their burden, what should we do? Should we feel their plight and call out to them in identification or do we ignore them knowing that the synagogue leader will like us better that way? How can we place our hands on them so they can stand up and praise God? This is the question the passage raises for me.

All of this happened on the Sabbath, the day of rest and worship. The Sabbath is meant to break the routine and gives us an opportunity to reflect on our lives. Wouldn't it be a good day for this woman to discover she is a loved child of God, no different than all other children of God? And wouldn't it be a good day for us humans to discover that we participate in each other's bondage. The Sabbath, that day for resetting life and getting things right is the perfect day for us all to be freed.

Jesus must have said all of this in such a way that everyone saw the connections. They recognized that those on top in that culture were there because others were on the bottom. Somehow on that day top and bottom got leveled out to where all of them recognize they were just human, God's loved children, no inferiors and no superiors. Everyone breathed pure air and it was exhilarating.

With things suddenly clarified, the opponents of Jesus felt ashamed—as they should. But we know they are forgiven too. Jesus is on his way to the cross to make that explicit and tangible so that they will be able to see it and feel it in their bones. In exposing the mechanism by which their little village worked, with its synagogue at the center, they have been given a great gift. Though the leaders may not know it, they too are in bondage. Their bondage is their need to keep their sister bent and to hide they do that even from themselves. It keeps them from claiming and celebrating their full humanity and praising God.

When the dark clouds of human ignorance and self-deceit cleared for a moment, the crowd saw it and rejoiced. I suspect they didn't understand what had happened but they knew Jesus had done something extraordinary. Many would understand it later, after the crucifixion and resurrection. Amen.