

Year C-Pentecost 14-Proper 16c

August 25, 2019

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Luke 13:10-17

Human Ignorance and Self-deceit Clear 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 photographs of women bearing huge bundles of sticks back to their homes to burn in small fires for food preparation and heat; of girls carrying water from distant wells through hot and dangerous terrain, of desperate mothers working two or three jobs in their attempt to provide for their children. I see them later in life with their backs bent, unable to straighten to their full height.

Jesus in Luke’s voice says a disabling spirit had attacked her body and her sense of worth. What is a disabling spirit? Could it be the crush of what everybody thinks is true but is not? The woman thinks she is of no value because no one sees her as having any. Everywhere she looks her worthlessness is confirmed. The culture around her likely sees her as a pack animal and holds her responsible for her beaten down condition. Maybe she was born in another country and that’s why God did not bless her.

When Jesus saw her, he called her to him and said “woman, you are set free from your sickness.” Jesus took the initiative. He touched her and she stood tall praising God. His touch had more power and certainly more compassion than the old spirit that had oppressed her for so many years. Jesus sees her through his eyes formed by kingdom of God values. He can value her as a daughter of Abraham and do this in a culture totally blind to her. And if she looks at herself through Jesus’ eyes she has value no matter what the community thinks. She has been set free of her sickness that was really the communities sickness hung on her all along. Satan, as you know, is always the accusing finger not some being in rivalry with God.

The scene shifts to the synagogue leader. He is incensed that the woman was healed on the Sabbath. Keeping the rules seems to have become more important than the people those rules were supposed to serve. If it had been one of his buddies who got healed, well that would be different. His buddies have value but Jesus healed a worn out woman of no worth on the Sabbath. Do you see how the synagogue leader’s way of thinking distorts his ability to see the woman and the truth? He knew every human was of worth before God. He just hadn’t thought it through when it came to a real person in front of him.

The leader sees Jesus as a threat and decides to relate to him as an enemy. He upbraids Jesus for doing work on the Sabbath. The religious leader can't say, "I hate you Jesus because you have made me look bad and threatened my power base." He can't even say that to himself. He's thinking, "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 respect of the community. I am 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."

The synagogue leader can't admit that he is a sinner too, like everyone else. He can't admit it because he doesn't want to think of himself as absolutely dependent on God's mercy and forgiveness. For him all of that is unnecessary because he keeps all the rules and the rules are what put you in right standing with God. So he short circuits all of this and comes out with "There are six days during which work is permitted. Come and be healed on those days, not on the Sabbath day."

Notice he blames the woman for coming for healing on the Sabbath when it was Jesus who took the initiative with her. She had nothing to do with it besides being there. There is some misogyny in this man's thinking. He misreads what happened and actually protects Jesus while faulting the woman. His social eyes have stigmatism that distorts his view of history and truth. If he will pay attention, the gospel of Jesus offers him a kind of cataract operation allowing him to clearly see again.

"The Lord replied, 'Hypocrites!'" He uses the plural. I wonder who he is thinking of besides the leader. Could it be the other men? Hypocrites say one thing and do another. They don't see the connection between their words and their actions.

These hypocrites treat their livestock better than this woman. They have no problem untying their animals for water but vigorously resist untying their sister. Could it be that she is their measuring stick telling them they are better and a cut above her?

These livestock are just livestock but she is different. 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 into their thinking. They didn't want her to get well. It would force them to see her as their equal—like African Americans and European Americans are equal, like Hispanics and Native Americans are equal, like LGBTQ people of all races and nationalities are equal—we are all children of God, even those who approach us with bent backs.

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 applications for any person or group of people our culture unfairly asks to carry our culture’s burdens: to be the ones in whom we store our resentment and who absorb our dysfunction?

In this story from Luke Jesus comes along and sees a woman bent by her culture. He 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 carry, even though it is not their burden, what should we do? Should we feel their plight and call out to them in identification? How can we place our hands on them so they can stand up and praise God?

Jesus must have said all of this in such a clear way that all of them saw the connections. With things suddenly clarified, the opponents of Jesus felt ashamed—as they should. But they too are forgiven. Even as all of this happens, Jesus is on his way to the cross to make human forgiveness explicit. In exposing the mechanism by which their little village works they have been given a great gift; for though their leaders may not know it, they too are in bondage. They are in bondage to their need to keep their sister bent and to hide that from themselves. It keeps them from claiming their humanity as a forgiven people able to praise God.

When the dark clouds of human ignorance and self-deceit cleared for a moment those present saw reality and rejoiced. They didn’t fully understand what had happened but they knew Jesus had done something extraordinary. Many would understand it later, after the crucifixion and resurrection. It is an understanding that is still slowly making its’ way through the world, even to this day. As this gospel encounters us it changes the way we see and relate to those we meet on our journey. Thanks be to God. Amen.