

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling  
First Presbyterian Church  
August 21, 2022  
Luke 13:10-17

### **“Well, when then?”**

All she did was show up. That’s all. She showed up for church, just like all of us did this morning.

Apparently she was still keeping the Sabbath holy despite it all; despite the worn out back and the inability to stand up straight; despite the stares she probably received and the finger wagging that may have come with it; despite the pain she likely endured and the distance she had to walk to get there. She still showed up. She showed up even though her condition might have led her to believe that God no longer cared about her.

She didn’t ask to be healed, she didn’t make a scene, she didn’t demand her freedom. She didn’t touch the hem of Jesus’ garment like the woman with the flow of blood did; or cry out from grief like others had and no one spoke up on her behalf. All she did was show up.

She did nothing to get Jesus’ attention. Nothing at all. But he noticed her; saw her enter the sanctuary in the middle of his sermon. He saw her just like you see people who enter in the middle of my sermons. It’s hard not to. And maybe Jesus’ congregation, like some of you, wonder why she can’t take a seat in the back pew so as not to interrupt the preacher, or disrupt your thoughts. But instead of pretending she hadn’t entered – trying to keep the people’s attention – he, too, looked. And when he saw how crippled she was and that her deliverance was 18 years overdue, he left the pulpit . . . disregarded the order of worship and protocol and the *the law!* And healed her. "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." He spoke to her and put his hands on her broken, bent body, and with that she felt power surge through her. Without hesitation, she straightened her once crooked back, stood tall and praised God . . .<sup>i</sup>

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This time the preacher in the pulpit had more than just a word to say. But didn't they know Jesus preaches a performative word? That when he preaches things happen? That when he teaches lives change? That when he speaks his words literally go to work?

Friends, the proclamation is never an end to itself. It's always a means to end. Always. We don't come on Sundays just to hear a good word, or a challenging word, or a comforting word. One thing that consistently happened when Jesus preached is that people were changed . . . at least those who were listening were changed or were upset to know they should change.

The synagogue leader is one of those who is upset that Jesus would expect him to change. "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day," the leader said indignantly *to the woman*. Who, again, didn't ask to be healed. "Come on those days to be cured." We don't know that she did come to be cured.

Back in the days when Jesus healed this woman, keeping the Sabbath holy and refraining from work was the law. Only in the instance of saving a life could the Sabbath be broken. So why did Jesus have to heal her on the Sabbath when she didn't even ask? She had suffered for 18 years, she could probably suffer another day.

This is, of course, the attitude of the synagogue leader. "Why do you have to heal her today? You have 6 other days in the week to work."

But before we all begin to rake the synagogue leader over the coals and feel a righteous indignation swell up within ourselves, (How could he do that? Can't he see she needs help?) may I remind us all that, like it or not, religious people have been known to use religion and/or the Bible as a defense for doing the wrong thing for years.

But is the synagogue leader a "bad guy"? His intentions are not evil, and his concerns are not without merit. He cares about right worship. Right belief. Right practice. He cares about honoring the Sabbath, obeying God's

laws, and upholding the faith-filled traditions of his religious community. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of those goals. But if not now, then when? When would be the right time to do the right thing? If not now, when? If not me, who?

What the leader misses is the heart of the Sabbath, the heart of God's law, the heart of the tradition. What the leader misses is compassion. The kind of compassion that trumps legalism every single time. The kind of compassion that doesn't cling to orthodoxy simply for orthodoxy's sake. The kind of compassion that consistently sees the broken body, the broken soul, and the broken spirit before it sees the broken commandment.

This story — like so many Gospel stories — illustrates a basic truth about God's inbreaking kingdom: the kingdom doesn't care about our timing, or our sense of etiquette, or our obsession with propriety and decorum. The kingdom doesn't care if the timing of another person's freedom might not be convenient for us. Because the kingdom cares about life. And it cares about life NOW.

Which is why Jesus took the leader to task and healed the woman anyway. In Jesus' opinion, it just didn't make any sense to tell the woman to come back tomorrow when he could heal her today. Sure she's been bent over for 18 years, and yes one more day probably won't kill her but why make her wait? After all, Jesus says, you don't make your animals wait for water until Monday, so why would you make her wait? That's ridiculous.

So Jesus heals her. Because today is the day of no more delays. Because today is the day of no more deliberations. Because not today is not an option.

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According to Luke, this is the last time Jesus taught in a synagogue, which I think is more than an incidental side note. I think it shows us that the religious leadership is already beginning to reject Jesus because what he does, doesn't translate with how they think the world should operate.

Folks, this story is about much more than Sabbath keeping or healing. This story is about God and what God wants for us and from us and doesn't want for us or from us. When we look at Jesus healing the bent over woman we get a picture of God at work and it becomes crystal clear that God doesn't want people to be bent over, literally or metaphorically. And that God doesn't want us to postpone people's freedom, or justice, or their deliverance and say "Come on back tomorrow," even if we do say it for good reasons or holy reasons. Jesus knows that not every law is just, and that just because it's legal doesn't mean it's right.

What we have here is a clash between the synagogue leader, who's using the law for the law's sake, and Jesus, who is using the law for relationship's sake. In other words, Jesus isn't undermining the law, he's undermining the insistence of using the law at the cost of one's neighbor.

I think of how frequently we do this in our own cultures and churches and society. We place our laws, both religious and secular, above people, even though God values people more than laws. See, here's the things: a Christian should always be about life and those things that bring life, not matter what day of the week it is. And this translates to concrete things like a living wage, not just a minimum wage because a living wage brings life; or healthcare that is affordable and accessible because that promotes life; or quality public education available to all children no matter where they live or how much their tax base is, because that promotes and improves quality of life. And I think it includes gun control because not getting gunned down in schools or at parades or in houses of worship promotes life. And I think it includes jails and where we put them and how big we want to build them, because building them across from schools or bigger just because we think more people will inhabit them doesn't promote life. And I think in all of his life promoting Jesus isn't concerned if the timing is convenient for us because today is the day of no more delays or deliberations. For if not now, when? And if not us, who?

The question at the heart of this gospel story is as relevant today as it was back then. Does the law trump human need? Should it trump human need?

The law supported the moral order of the world, but healing a bent over woman on the Sabbath was not a part of the moral order. So when Jesus heals her, he's doing much more than healing her. He's challenging the core assumptions of people as to how the world . . . and the law, should work.

The late Marcus Borg said that this story epitomizes Jesus' ministry. Everything that Jesus stood for, fought for, and died for is wrapped in this story. By laying his hands on the woman he sets her free. She is no longer a daughter of Satan, bound by his curse. She is now a daughter of Abraham, always was, always loved by God. Will we love her the same?

This isn't a simple story about healing or the Sabbath. This is a story about God that shows what God wants from us and provides a picture of what God's ultimate kingdom will be like. And in this kingdom, things will be made right. The world will be repaired. There will be no blindness or loss of hearing, no one broken or disfigured. In the reign of God, there will be no conflicts between what is good for one and what is good for all. And in this reign, all people will stand tall because this is, ultimately, what God wants from us.

For if not us, then who? And if not now, well . . . when?

Amen.

Sources:

Sermon brainwave for August 21, 2022

Raquel Lettsome, *The Craft of Preaching* 2017

Journey with Jesus, Debie Thomas, 2019, "She Stood Up Straight"

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