

SERMON
“God’s compassion transcends our rules”
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13th Sunday of Pentecost, August 19, 2010
St John’s Chapel, UCC

Deuteronomy 5:13-15
Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And 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. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

But 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."

But 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? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, to be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?"

When 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.

The two women

She was bent over and was quite unable to stand upright.

It is a powerful image, isn't it. I am sure your memory gives you a picture of someone who will fit this description. Reading this text, I instantly thought of two women I met in Czech. They both together give that woman in our gospel story a face for me.

The one woman had the most crooked back I have ever seen in my life. Even standing straight, that Lady's back was stooped forward in almost a 90 degree angle. Can you imagine that? It made you suck in your breath, saying "Oh my God." Her back was a story book of her life. It told of very hard labor, working a huge garden, tending the animals, washing the large family's wash by hand with the old tools, that some of you might know still. She was doing the entire woman's work and since the times were tough, she also had to do the men's job as well. Her back told the story of Europe's terrible last century of war, loss and oppression under Nazi and Communist rule. All of this is in her crooked, bent back. And yet, this woman was not broken; when I met her, her Spirit was strong, as strong as I have seldom seen. She was the center around which her family turned, children and grandchildren alike, a matriarch if I ever saw one. She was bent, but not broken.

The other lady was not bent, but she was broken. My wife and I met her in the pedestrian shopping part of an older town center. It was beautifully restored and lots of nice little shops and cafes helped to make that center blossom. A crowd of people, tourists and locals, were streaming through those small streets and alleys when a good deal apart from the crowd, we saw this old lady standing.

She was of rather small stature and wore the old dirty work apron that even my Grandma did not wear anymore. Her thin limbs stuck out from the faded and worn dress and her feet were buried in muddy, worn out Wellington boots. We couldn't see what she was doing, but she looked quite forlorn, trying hard to blend in with the wall behind her. It made us approach her. Coming closer we see that she was selling flowers – not those bred flowers we buy from the store perfected in smell and shape and color. No. Flowers from her garden, field flowers, haggard and bent, old and colorless – they looked pitiful. But what made it even more pitiful was that the lady knew herself just how pitiful they were. You could see that these flowers were her last resort to keep from the indignity of begging. She felt ashamed and clung to them

like to a life line. The country's opening to the West improved the lives of many of its people. For the old, especially the women if they were widowed and without a wider family, the country's new wealth went right past them, placing them on the fringe of their society. Who cares for the ones who are left behind when all is moving forward? This lady was one of them. Looking in her eyes told us that she had long given up on hope, and they were empty and stale. Her back wasn't bent but her spirit was crippled. Where the first lady's bent back made us wince, this lady's fate made us inwardly cry out: God have mercy. The bent woman or the dispirited woman, I am sure you have seen her too.

Healing

The woman of our gospel story has this old lady's face, a face that tells of her desperate situation. She has a spirit of weakness, a spirit that cripples her, as our translation puts it. She is bent over and cannot stand. A woman that Satan bound – her situation is so obviously appalling, clearly it is not just a minor evil spirit, as we hear of in other stories of Jesus' healing, but it is utterly hopeless and terrible, the boss of evil himself must have had a hand in that. It suggests that beyond the physical ailment, this woman has been robbed of all life force, hope and dignity...and left bound, bent and broken.

And Jesus goes right to her, instantly moved by compassion, sharing that same thought: 'God have mercy on this woman!', and heals her. Unlike in other healing stories, this woman does not even have to ask for healing, no sign of faith is asked before the healing sets in. I do not think that she is even in a condition to ask anymore, way too far gone on the hopeless road to even care. Eighteen years of pain and suffering are more than long enough to kill a spirit.

Jesus goes the whole way for her...seeks her out, lifts her up, unties the bonds that keep her spirit captive – and no doubt for that woman, God has come to her because only God could overcome that darkness. So she answers appropriately by praising God.

Division

Like many healing stories it could have ended now, right? All is well and good.

Last week Pastor Becky taught us about Jesus bringing not peace but division, and today we are in the midst of it. Division.

It is Sabbath, and Jesus does it again, as he will again in the gospel of Luke: he heals on the day of rest and that is no good. So enter the synagogue leader, the representative and keeper of tradition, and the dispute begins. Though he is upset over what Jesus did, he is not a mean guy; even his interpretation does not seem heartless:

“There are six days she could have come, but the seventh is for rest.” Meaning: “Jesus, if that woman fell sick today, or she broke her back just today, well of course we need to treat her. But she could have been healed yesterday; in fact she could have been healed last year. Surely she could have waited even just until tonight – when the day is over- to be healed. I mean really, what is the rush here? It is the holy day; we did not have to risk breaking the rest for this, right? Right!”

He doesn't sound that unreasonable, does he. He is concerned about being faithful to his tradition. In that time, the Sabbath was not just a thing among many rules and practices, it was an outward sign of being Jewish that any non-Jew could see. They are not working one day a week, well then, they must be Jews. So for the synagogue leader, refraining from work was one of the highest expressions of being Jewish and following faithfully God's command. Therefore, much thought was put into the concept of Sabbath, and it was explained in detail what was considered work and what was not. And these practices wouldn't be understood as being regulative or oppressive, but as an act of faith, fulfilling the blessing of what it is to enjoy the rest on Sabbath. And if you think about it, isn't it a blessing to experience a God rule that allows you to step back from the toil of the week and slow your life down? To enjoy what you have worked for, to take time for yourself, for your spouse for your children, and for your relationship with God. That is a wonderful thing to enjoy and I understand why Sabbath can be understood as a foretaste of God's realm. Unfortunately, despite our best intentions, human regulations are in constant danger of being more of a burden than a blessing; and as we well know, that is also true for the rules that we make up in the realm of religion.

To Jesus, the not so unreasonable reply is so flawed by blindness for the suffering of that woman that he can only force out an invective: You hypocrites! Pretty harsh an answer, don't you think? Get into that situation though: he is driven with compassion for that woman, cannot bear to look at her misery one second longer more, heals her, and then he gets to hear: couldn't she have waited just a touch longer? Jesus is fuming, and you can sense the anger behind the language he uses for his argumentation: Does not each of you on the Sabbath

untie the ox and the donkey from the manger and lead it away to give it water? It is a rabbinical argumentative technique to argue from the lesser to the higher. But to me, it sounds not unlike an utterance of indignation that I heard last week from someone in this parish commenting on hungry children living in Springfield: "Sometimes you get the impression that people would quicker help dogs than they would kids." Not less drastic is Jesus in the next sentence, and the Greek text reveals just that in fewer words better than the English, so I rephrase it for you:

Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, that is one of God's chosen people, chosen in the times of our forefather's, freed from Egypt, given inheritance in the Land of Israel, beloved by God and part of the people that God calls his inheritance, shouldn't she, who was bound for eighteen long, long years by Satan, God's enemy, shouldn't she also be set free on the day of Sabbath, no especially on the Sabbath day?

Can you feel the agitation? For Jesus, it is incomprehensible that this synagogue leader and many others, did not understand what drove him. The compassion that made him heal that woman that could not bear to wait, not even until the evening. The answer, "to wait to respect the religious rule and sentiment" pales in the light of that overflowing love, and it reveals in its core a touch of cynical cruelty- couldn't she just wait, come on, what is one more day when she already could wait 18 years?

Did Jesus do away with the Sabbath then altogether? Was he a lover of novelties? No, of course not, but he differs in the understanding of how to really get to the heart and spirit of keeping the Sabbath. On a previous occasion of healing on the Sabbath in Luke, Jesus asks: "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to destroy it?" (Luke 6:9) It is the same here. Jesus is not healing in spite of it being the Sabbath, but because it is the right way of keeping the Sabbath, he heals.

In the Exodus version of the Ten Commandments, the Sabbath is paralleled with God's rest on the creation day, in the Deuteronomy version we heard that Sabbath is coupled with God's liberating Israel from Egypt.

***(Deuteronomy 5:15)** Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.*

The Exodus is very present in Jesus' understanding of the Sabbath in our text, too. And you notice it in the language – I rephrase it again so you hear the play on words:

Woman be untied from your weakness, if you untie the ox, ought not this daughter of Abraham be untied from her bonds on the Sabbath day.

The parallel to the Exodus shows even more clearly in another text from Leviticus:

(Leviticus 26:13) I the LORD am your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.

Liberating this woman from her misery, emulating the kind of love and mercy which God has shown in the Exodus, isn't that what we should do on the Sabbath?

Jesus sees this day as the great liberation: its intention is liberation, its fulfillment is liberation, and that cannot be tempered by manmade rules that infringe upon that intention. The Sabbath is a gift for us humans, not to oppress, but to give rest and be set free. On this day we can glimpse a foretaste of the coming Kingdom. Therefore, let this guide your actions as well.

Sabbath – for us

We come together on this, as on each Sunday, with our burdens and troubles, our thanksgiving, our confessions and our pleas for God's mercy. We come as we seek that same wholeness that is sought for on the Sabbath, the liberating Spirit of the Exodus, and the healing compassion of Jesus. We are seeking the peace and the rest that is found in the presence of God. We come in hope that we are set free, and set outside our bonds that tie us to everyday obligations, to experience the realization of the Kingdom of God in our midst, and to carry from this exempt time the strength to faithfully live God's Love in our coming week. Some of us might come in the guise of the bent over woman today. Do we let God ignite our compassion to reach out and be an agent in their healing? We might also come - as individual Christians or as the whole church - in the role of the Synagogue leader, bound in our tradition and our understanding of the right way to believe. Can we get real, then, with the freedom that is given to us as followers of the Risen Christ and helps us to base our rules and decision making on God's Kingdom? Will we allow ourselves to be daring enough to reform our thinking, and maybe even our dearest traditions when we are touched by God's compassion?

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.