

Gospel: Luke 13:10-17

How do you feel about the leader of the synagogue? I must admit, I'm conflicted in my own feelings about him.

It can be easy to make him the villain of the piece. This man of privilege; because he is male, because he is chief elder of the synagogue, the center of Jewish faith outside of the Temple. This man who, despite being offended by this healing on the Sabbath, apparently thinks so little of this woman who has been afflicted with a spirit of weakness for 18 years, that he rebukes her without looking at her or addressing her directly.

What a pompous, self-righteous jerk, we might cry! Confident, because even Jesus calls him a hypocrite- one who cannot see how God is truly at work both in Jesus and in this healing of the woman.

And I sit back comfortable in my own self-righteousness and an uneasy thought strikes me... what if I'm the leader of the synagogue?

What if I'm the one standing in the way of Jesus restoring someone to being fully who they are? What if I'm the pompous, self-righteous jerk. What if I'm the one who doesn't how God is at work?

My impulse, then, is to defend the guy. I mean, he was just trying to fulfill what he understood was the way to be faithful to God. Keeping the Sabbath holy was one of the big commandments, part of what it means to keep the covenant with God. So, he was not trying to be mean or deny her healing... he was trying to live according to his beliefs.

But again, that uneasy, nagging thought strikes me... where are those places in my life where I am so confident that I am doing the will of God that I keep other people in bondage? Or, to put it in a slightly better light, where do I ignore the opportunity to free someone else from that which binds them, because I don't think it's right or the right time?

Then it really struck me. This man, for all his privilege, is in bondage as surely as the woman who was bent over. And I wonder if what Jesus has done, the word he has spoken, will free him, too.

And I look at myself and pray that it is so.

At its core, my siblings in Christ, this story is about what Luke sees as the main ministry of Jesus, the one he stated so long ago in that first synagogue scene in Luke, he has come to proclaim release to the captives, to lift up the lowly and the weak, and in so doing usher in the Kingdom of God.

There is a lot we could cover in this story, but everything is interpreted through that lens of the call of Jesus to announce release to the captives.

And that is what Jesus does for this woman, bound for 18 years by a spirit of weakness. One that leaves her bent over, a posture of submission and shame in that time and place. One that, added to the fact that she is a woman, places her on the fringes of society and her faith. Skirting at the edge of the vision of those who are more "acceptable"

Jesus begins the process of freeing her, first, by seeing her. Isn't that interesting, the power that just seeing someone can have? It raises the question, who are we not seeing? Who do we look right past in our daily

lives without even giving them a thought? The cafeteria or fast food server, the beggar at the off ramp, the alien at the border, or even those who assemble with us. Who do we not see because they are “weak”, bent over and bound by addiction, grief, things that they cannot control? Who do we look right past because to engage with them would be exhausting?

But, Jesus does much more than see her. The next thing Jesus does is invite her into the center. Now this might seem a bit chauvinistic, “Come here woman” but what Jesus is doing is inviting her into the center of attention, to enter right into the center of the place where she had always been kept on the fringes because of who she was and how she looked because she was not acceptable. Jesus leverages his own power and celebrity to bring her into the place of honor. So that everyone there may finally, after 18 years, see HER. The fullness of who she is.

Then, he speaks to her. A literal word of freedom. Note, he does not say he has cured her (the language of the ruler of the synagogue) rather he says that he has freed her, released her from the spirit of weakness that had bound her, bent her over for so long.

But, note, that word of release is accompanied by the concrete touch of Jesus. Almost as if he says, “You are released! Here, let me show you!” Then, he touches her, lifting her up, and she is re-built, reconstructed right before their eyes, standing in the fullness of her humanity. The same woman she has always been, but now she is seen in the fullness of the image of God that she bears!

What do the people who are gathered there see...now? What do they feel? Are they ashamed, astonished? Empowered?

And what of the leader of the synagogue. The one who is now shamed. I pray that what Jesus does here also sets him free. What binds him is not the spirit of weakness, but an assuredness of his own righteousness. He is bound to the idea of Law as an unyielding bulwark. He is as bound as the woman was. And my only hope is that the Word Jesus speaks frees him. Releases him. Because so often I am him.

Everyone in this story is bound by something. Their own self-righteousness or ignorance, bound by things beyond their control. By what has been placed upon them by others.

What are you bound by, my siblings in Christ? What bends you double, perhaps just on the inside? What can you not escape on your own...even though you've tried..oh so many times?

For like everyone in this story we are all bound...and cannot free ourselves.

But! We have a God who has come to us and set us free! In the person of Jesus Christ and through the waters of baptism God has released us from bondage to sin, death, and the devil and claimed us as God's own.

The Gospel of John opens with these lines. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. That Word, Jesus, is all that we need to free us.

But, often, like the woman bent over by those things which bind her, we need the touch of Jesus... the concrete to show us the reality of our healing.

Jesus' actions remind me of an acting class I took in college, Stage, Speech and Movement. It was designed to make us aware of our bodies,

of the particular, and often unnatural, ways in which we moved, spoke, and held ourselves. There were several mantras that we were taught to get us into a neutral body position, “Let my neck be free, that my head can move forward and up, and my back can lengthen and expand.” Like Jesus’ words to the woman, they were freeing...but when we first heard them they didn’t work.

We had forgotten long ago the reality of how our bodies should be. So, Dana, our professor, would walk among us and move us. A touch at the chin and bottom of the spine. A gentle pressure to shift. And suddenly we were standing tall, easy, free.

The reality of what we were aiming for was in that mantra, but we needed the touch to get us into that position. Then, once we had experienced that. We could use the mantra to get ourselves back into that position.

This is why we need to be here, my siblings in Christ. This is why I need to be here. The Word spoken to me at my baptism, “Child of God...you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever” is enough to release me from all that will bind me. But I need the concrete reminder, the touch of fellow believers, of the Word in Scripture, of the power of prayer, to place me back into that position. To remind me of the posture with which I carry myself.

We need to be here, because here we are re-positioned, spiritually. Because whether we are the self-righteous leader of the synagogue or the woman bent over we all need to be released.

We need to be here, because we are reminded of our own reality when we see others freed. As we will see Nova Giorgianna freed this day, through the Word who has come to proclaim her release in the waters of Baptism.

We need to be here to receive into our bodies the Body and Blood of Jesus, the Word come to us. Who touches us and reminds us who we are, Child of God...created in the image of God...free from all that would seek to bind us; greed, sin, death, addiction, self-righteousness.

We are free in Christ my friends so that we might go and proclaim that freedom to others. So that we might look for those who are on the fringes of society and see them, invite them into the center so others may see them as well, so that we might proclaim that freedom to them.

In Christ we are freed from sin, death, and the devil but we have also been freed for...our neighbors. Who, remembering Jesus definition from the parable of the Good Samaritan, is the one who is in need (bound) and the one who helps me in my need...in my bondage.

So, let us go this day confident in our own freedom and the claim God has on us in our lives. So that we live free and proclaim that freedom to others.