

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 25, 2019

Text: Luke 13:10-17

Title: Unbent

Whenever I read or hear today's Gospel, I picture a woman I once knew. She could not identify a person walking toward her because she couldn't look straight ahead at another person. She could not look into the face of another adult because her body was bent down at about 60 degrees and she was able to look only at the floor. The blue sky was beyond her field of vision; the beauty of a rainbow in the sky was denied to her. She knew most people from their voice or their feet – not from their face.

Luke tells that Jesus was in the synagogue on the sabbath when he saw a woman who had been crippled for 18 years. "She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight." Jesus called her over. Notice that she did not approach Jesus asking him to heal her, instead Jesus called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." He laid his hands on her and immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.

I would have expected the people around her to rejoice in this miraculous healing, and ultimately most of them did, but first there was an encounter with the leader of the synagogue. His immediate response was indignation because Jesus had cured the woman on the sabbath; Jesus had broken the rules of sabbath observance that prohibited anyone from doing any work on the sabbath.

Rather than approach Jesus directly, he tried to stir up the crowd instead. He 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.” Sabbath laws were very important to the Jewish people in Jesus’ day and a violation of them was a big thing. However, the laws were rather complicated and as Jesus pointed out, it was entirely permissible to take care of an animal by untying it and leading it to water. Taking care of animals was important and making an animal go thirsty would have been an act of cruelty.

Sabbath laws absolutely allowed whatever actions were necessary to save someone’s life if it were in danger, but this woman was not in danger. She had been crippled for 18 years – what difference would it make if Jesus had told her to come back the next day – what difference would one day make? It is also possible that she would have been seen as less worthy because she was a woman, and her 18-year ailment might have been understood by their culture as a sign of sinfulness.

But Jesus wasn’t buying any of this. She was a child of Abraham, a precious child of God and 18 years was too long for her to suffer. Jesus had the power to relieve her suffering and nothing could justify waiting even one more day. Remember that she did not come to Jesus asking him to heal her. His was a spontaneous act of compassion for a person who was suffering. Alleviating her suffering was more important than the traditional rules of sabbath observation.

Jim Rice, an editor for Sojourners wrote that “Jesus came not to throw out the tradition, but to show us that it can never replace – and should never be allowed to hinder – the expression of genuine care for one another.”ⁱ Jesus asked if they would take care of an animal’s thirst on the sabbath, how could they not feel obligated to set a woman free from something that had kept her in bondage for 18 years. It seems that for

Jesus, meeting someone's needs is maybe even more fitting and important on the sabbath than at any other time. It honors the true spirit of the sabbath – a time set aside to honor and worship God.

As is true of most events in Jesus' life, most things we read in the Bible, this is about more than the healing of just one woman. We are meant to do more than see this as just a nice story with a great ending for one woman. We are meant to learn some important things and to allow them to transform our lives.

There is something significant about the visual of a woman bent over so that she cannot stand up straight. There are so many things she simply cannot see; so much that she misses out on in her life. Jesus' understanding of captivity included anything that robbed people of the ordinary joys of life. Being bent over symbolizes the many burdens weighing her down; the burdens being heaped on her by society and by the faith community. When Jesus heals her of her ailment, she is liberated from oppression and as she is able to stand tall, her dignity is restored.

Many of us have experienced times in our lives when we have felt weighted down by various burdens, by things that have oppressed our spirits and prevented us from seeing some of the important things around us. For each of us who are bent over by circumstances in life, the good news is that God does not want us to be bent over and to suffer but seeks to release us from bondage. This release may not change the outward manifestation of the situation, we may still be unemployed, we may still have financial stress, our children, grandchildren, or other loved one may not have changed, but we are set free to deal with these situations from a place of freedom and confidence in God rather than from a place of fear and bondage.

Being set free from bondage is what changes a victim of domestic violence or child abuse from a victim to a survivor. It is what changes us from victims of our circumstances to survivors, to people who can find hope even in what others may see as impossible circumstances. Being set free from bondage is what allows us to see God's presence in the midst of the horrible, allows us to praise God and seek God's guidance even when we feel least like praising God.

Like the bent over woman, God wants to set us free from the bondage of whatever it is that may be preventing us from living a life fully open to God and the amazing possibilities that only God can offer. With God's help we can look ahead, look up, see God working in our lives and in the lives of those around us. For each of us the call is also to live our lives so that others may see God in us, loving and calling God's creation to freedom from bondage.

Let us also take a look at the leader of the synagogue; the one who raised the opposition to Jesus' healing actions. Like so many who are entrusted with the leadership of organizations or systems, he has learned to love the system more than people. He did not see a woman who was bent over and crippled; he saw only a violation of the rules.

In an attempt to keep things running smoothly, rules are established that are designed to help that happen. We do need laws, but it is so easy for these rules or laws to become the focus and the most important thing. It is so easy to forget or lose the reason for them in the first place.

William Barclay, a renowned New Testament interpreter and professor, wrote a series of Bible Studies. In his Study of Luke, originally published in 1953 he wrote about the attitude of the leader of the

synagogue and how this relates to society. As I read what he wrote, it did not sound like something that was more than 65 years old.

In times of war, or in times of uncertainty or anxiety, it is common to lump individuals together into groups who have all the same characteristics. We see this happen when we, or others, talk about immigrants, people of a particular ethnicity, political party, religious faith or any other group of people. It is so easy to forget that groups are made up of individuals and no two individuals are exactly the same. The temptation is for systems to lump individuals together like statistics. Christianity reminds us that individuals come (or should come) before systems.

Barclay said that Christianity is essential for a democracy. This caught my attention, because we insist, at least in theory, that there should be a separation of church and state. However, we often don't have that separation and increasingly it seems that there are many contemporary leaders who call themselves Evangelical Christians who think that they should be able to impose their beliefs on everyone else. I generally cringe, or worse, when I hear that speak and I want to scream that what they are saying does not sound anything like the God I worship.

But Barclay, writing 65 years ago, bases his assertion on what I would agree are very basic and critical tenets of Christianity that value each individual as a precious child of God. He writes, "If ever Christian principles are banished from political and economic life there is nothing left to keep at bay the totalitarian state where individuals are lost in the system and exist, not for their own sake, but only for the sake of the system."ⁱⁱⁱ

He reminds us that this is not limited to the secular world but that this worship of systems over individuals commonly invades the Church as well and that churches too often have trouble and strife over legalistic details of

procedure. He warns that “In the world and in the Church, we are constantly in peril of loving systems more than we love God and more than we love one another.”ⁱⁱⁱ

He reminds us that Jesus’ actions make it clear that it is not God’s will that any person should suffer one minute longer than is absolutely necessary. I think the challenge for us, is to put these basic Christian principles into action every day. They help us see each person as an individual rather than part of a group. They help us pay attention to the needs of each person. When this is part of our every day functioning and thinking, it will make a difference in how we think about policies and procedures in churches, workplaces, schools, and governments.

With school starting this week and next, I have seen several postings reminding teachers that asking children to write about their summer vacation would mean for some children only that they were hungry a lot without the benefit of school breakfasts and lunches and maybe that they spent their summer caring for younger siblings. A standard beginning of school practice can be challenging and upsetting for some children.

Health insurance practices may not really take into account the needs and differences of individuals. About 10 years ago, a friend and I had very similar medical issues with our backs. On paper they sounded the same – same location on back, same issue, but in practice they were very different. She couldn’t sit down for more than a minute or two and had to do everything standing. I couldn’t stand for more than a few minutes and had to do everything sitting. What worked for one of us did not work for the other.

In the United Methodist Church, there is still great disagreement and acrimony around the full inclusion of LGBTQ persons as ordained pastors

and around welcoming and performing marriages in our churches by our pastors. My very oversimplified personal perspective is that one side is acting like the leader of the synagogue rigidly interpreting specific passages from the Bible and the other is looking at the bigger picture and asking what action of goodness, love, and compassion would be required by Jesus.

We are all aware of the large number of people who are trying to cross our countries borders and the attempts of our government to deal with this. However, among policymakers and enforcers there is a tendency to make one size policy fit all and a serious lack of trying to understand why individuals are making the decision to make this dangerous trek and instead lump them all into one group focusing on law breaking rather than on trying to alleviate suffering.

I hope and pray that if we can focus more on individuals as Jesus did then we can pay attention to the needs of persons rather than the interests of the institution. Maybe we can even start to find some ways to think differently about issues so that we can begin to recognize solutions that are out of the box. Over and over again, we see God working above and beyond and outside of our limited perceptions and inviting us to widen and expand our perceptions so that we may see things as God sees them.

Jesus' actions were a testimony to God's goodness and compassion. May we be open to allowing that goodness and compassion to make a difference in our lives so that we may experience freedom in our lives from the burdens that weigh us down. May we also be the hands and feet of Christ in our world sharing that love, goodness and compassion in the places where it is most needed.

ⁱⁱ Rice, Jim. "Lord of the Sabbath" found in Preaching the Word a Sojourner's subscription service.

ⁱⁱ Barclay, William, The Gospel of Luke, The New Daily Study Bible. P.211

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid