



Sunday August 21, 2022
Luke 13:10-17 (Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompañado

I don't know her name. I don't know where she comes from. I don't even know why she appears in the synagogue on the particular Sabbath day named in today's Gospel. But I can picture her. An exhausted yet resilient woman resigned to the fact that this is her reality. A woman "bent over," and "quite unable to stand up." A woman who spends her days staring at the ground, staring at her own feet, staring at the dusty sandals of those who pass by her on the road. Not because she wants to avoid eye contact, or miss the sunrise each morning, or forget what the stars look like, or never raise her face to feel the evening breeze – but because she has no other choice.

Luke tells us that when the bent over woman encounters Jesus, she's been crippled for eighteen years. I wonder if she showed up for worship every weekend during those two exhausting decades. I wonder if anyone noticed her. I wonder what hope or meaning or comfort the weekly ritual offered her – if any. I wonder what sort of life she shuffled home to afterwards.

According to the text, the woman doesn't ask Jesus for help when she appears in the synagogue on the particular Sabbath day in question. He's teaching – most likely surrounded by a crowd. She doesn't approach him. In her bent over state, who knows if she even notices him. But he sees her. He sees her. When he calls her over and she approaches, he puts his sermon on hold, and says the thing Jesus always says in the Gospels when he encounters the sick, the broken, the dying, the dead: "You are set free from your ailment."

Then, the Gospel tells us, Jesus "laid his hands on her, and immediately she stood up straight and began praising God." It would be wonderful if the story ended here wouldn't it, except as soon as Jesus unbinds the crippled woman, the leader of the synagogue voices his disapproval and irritation. Essentially, his angry criticism drowns out her joyful praise: "There are six days on which work ought to be done," he tells the crowds, "come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day."

In other words, the leader protests because Jesus disrupts the regular Sabbath schedule of the synagogue. Jesus messes with tradition. Worse, he places a socially unnecessary, physically disabled, and spiritually vulnerable woman at the center of the tradition. Jesus allows the woman's need to interrupt his own sermon and welcomes her song of praise even though it upsets the synagogue's order of service.

To be clear, though, the leader of the synagogue isn't a "bad guy." His intentions aren't malicious, and his concerns aren't 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 spiritual community. Technically, according to the law he's right, you aren't supposed to do any work on the Sabbath, so in keeping with the law there isn't anything wrong with what he's trying to do.

Except 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 outshines legalism every single time. The kind of compassion that doesn't cling to custom simply for the sake of order. The kind of compassion that consistently sees the broken body, the broken soul, 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 correctness. The kingdom cares about love, and cares about it NOW.



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Jesus' compassion points to a greater purpose today, and that is, to heal and to comfort and to share love and grace at all costs. In excess of every expectation. At the expense of every rule. Breaking the rule about working or healing or whatever on the Sabbath is Jesus' larger mission – and ultimately our greatest hope.

The point seems to be that the only rule that matters to Jesus is the one about loving God and loving neighbor and living in any way and every way possible that brings that love to bear in the world. So, toss out the rules. Literally. And this is something I can make sense of. It's something each of us can do something about. And yes, I am talking about breaking the rules – at least the ones that keep God's love from being shared in as many ways and with as many people as it attempts to reach.

When someone tells you that you can't or shouldn't love someone because... When your own scorekeeping, rule-following heart tells you that you shouldn't forgive someone because or until ... When your own fear tries to convince you that you shouldn't be that generous. When society tells you that you shouldn't extend hospitality because. When your own history and experience tells you that you should or shouldn't or can or can't because "that's not the way you've ever done it before."

In the face of whatever rules or expectations threaten to limit what God can accomplish by grace – for you and through you, Jesus gets up in the synagogue on the Sabbath day and breaks the rules. He breaks the law so that we can see just how brave and bold and beyond reason God's love means to be. And how beyond the rules we're called to be. However, if you're not convinced, then I invite you to think about Jesus' resurrection from the dead as the sign of just how far God is willing to go to break every rule for our sake.

Most of us, like the woman in the story, know what it's like to be bound by circumstances that diminish, misrepresent, and hurt us. Most of us know, or have known, what it's like to lose control, mobility, and dignity to forces too powerful for us to defeat on our own.

So, given these realities then, how can we leave room for Jesus to show up and surprise us? How can we make sure that we're not so entrenched in our theological, liturgical, cultural, or political points of view that we fear and resist the unexpected? The untraditional? The unconventional? How can we make sure that our religious and life practices and preferences don't get in the way of God's tender and compassionate "unbending?"

Jesus responds to the leader of the synagogue by calling the healed woman "a daughter of Abraham." "Ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?"

Jesus doesn't stop at freeing the woman. He restores her to community – to her community. At the same time, he calls on that community to repent of its hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness and embrace her as its own. Not as an object of pity or contempt. But as a daughter, as an heir, as a human being worthy of both love and dignity.

"Jesus laid his hands on her, and immediately she stood up straight." What would it be like if the Church were known for this? For restoring stature, dignity, community, and honor to people crippled in all the terrible ways the world cripples them. Jesus is all about our unbending. Our standing tall. Our finding our voices so that we can praise the God who has unbound us. And my dear friends, I pray that our lives could be about such compassionate acts, too. Thanks be to God. Amen.