

August 21, 2022 Rev. Katheryn McGinnis

Let us pray. God of Glory, open our hearts and minds to the hearing and receiving of your Word today. May we listen, discern, and follow wherever you call. Amen.

Our scripture for today comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 13, verses 10-17. Listen now for the word of the lord.

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ 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. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³ When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴ 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.” ¹⁵ 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 to water? ¹⁶ And 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? ¹⁷ When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

The word of the lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Today’s scripture from the Gospel of Luke is likely a familiar story. It’s the story of Jesus healing on the sabbath in the synagogue and the religious leaders there challenging Jesus – saying this healing violates the rules of the sabbath.

And as we know in response, as Jesus usually does, he shows them all the greater truth, and in turn, widens their view of God’s kingdom.

Yes, we know the story in general, but do we know its details? When you think of Jesus healing on the sabbath in the Synagogue do you think of who he heals? Do you think of the bent over woman?

If you didn’t, that’s understandable because there are actually two stories of Jesus healing on the sabbath in the gospel of Luke.

In chapter 6, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand in the synagogue on the sabbath, and there again the religious leaders object and Jesus shows them the greater truth. And in turn, widens their view of God’s kingdom.

So, why have a second story? Why does Jesus need to heal twice on the sabbath to show this greater truth?

Well, maybe the answer lies in the differences between the two.

The main difference between these two stories is who Jesus heals. In the first story, Jesus heals a man with a withered hand, and in the second he heals the woman who was bent over and unable to stand up straight.

So, what is it about this bent over woman? What is Jesus showing us, or teaching us, or revealing a greater truth to us through healing her that perhaps was not shown in the first healing story?

Why her?

To answer these questions another question must be answered first: who is the bent over woman?

In these healing stories, we often are tempted to jump straight to critiquing the religious leaders, but we shouldn't get there too soon. Not without understanding who was the person that Jesus healed.

Luke doesn't write much about this woman. But what little he does write paints a greater story. "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."

We know that this woman has a spirit that crippled her for 18 years.

18 years without being able to stand up straight. 18 years of looking down at the floor, 18 years of having to strain side to side to even get a glimpse of the sun or the sky. 18 years of not being able to look a person face to face. And after 18 years, she seems to have grown accustomed to it, accepted her fate. Adjusted her life because of it to fit her new reality.

As does everyone else.

Because of this disability, they have pushed her aside. She goes unnoticed, not worthy of their time or attention. No longer part of their community.

So why her? What does she bring to the table? What is it about this healing? This was not an urgent healing.

She was crippled by the spirit for 18 years. Surely, she could have waited another day. But Jesus does not wait.

He will not wait. He heals her then and there.

Not only does he heal her then and there, but he does so without prompt. She does not ask to be healed. She does not approach Jesus.

Jesus sees her. Jesus calls her over. And Jesus heals her.

It is not a pity healing. He does not feel sorry for her. He seeks **her** out and sets her free. The language here matters: he does not fix her. He sets her free.

"Woman, you are set free from your ailment." She was not broken, she needed liberation.

So why this healing? Well, maybe, this healing because Jesus healing the bent over woman, setting her free from the spirit that crippled her shows us that Christ's healing is so much wider than just going from sickness to health.

The bent over woman shows us that Christ's healing disrupts the status quo. Disrupts and overturns the rules of our society. (Always remember – Luke is the gospel of reversals – the gospel that always seeks to lift the marginalized.)

The bent over woman was bound by Satan for 18 long years. Yet, it did not incapacitate her. It did not keep her from God. Quite the opposite.

For even though she cannot stand up straight, even though she goes unnoticed by her own community – she is there. She is there in the synagogue on the sabbath, and once Jesus sees her and heals her, she immediately stands up and praises God.

In healing her, Jesus exposes the neglect of everyone there, of the religious leaders – everyone who deemed her no more worthy than livestock.

In healing her, in bringing her to the forefront, Jesus also exposes the brutal reality that human suffering and evil are right there in that synagogue.

Right here in our own beloved houses of worship. This healing is too much. This healing has exposed truths that they do not want to face. Evil, suffering, their own neglect.

So, what do the religious leaders do? Instead of facing these truths, they hide behind the sabbath. They pick apart the laws to cover up the truth revealed before them. Have we not done the same thing?

We may not observe a sabbath that mirrors the sabbath observed by the people there in the synagogue that day. But have we, when revealed with a hard truth about us, instead of facing it, hid behind laws or rules or norms of worship.

We hide behind anything we can find rather than simply facing the bent over woman. The woman whom Jesus chose. Healing is an act of liberation.

The heart of the sabbath worship celebrates the Israelites deliverance from slavery in Egypt. So, setting a woman free from the bounds of Satan is surely holy sabbath work.

It is the very fulfillment of the sabbath. And the people do come to recognize this – for Luke tells us that the entire crowd was rejoicing.

This rejoicing signals that the bent over woman was not the only one healed that day.

The hope in the bent over woman is that everyone there was healed that day.

Delivered from their neglect, liberated from their narrow view of what makes a sabbath holy. Their status quo disrupted so that God's kingdom can break through.

In many ways, we are all the bent over woman. Bound by the limitations of our bodies, the limitations of our humanity – but it does not need to keep us from God.

Quite the opposite. Just like the bent over woman, we too, we who stare at the ground unable to stand up straight and see the sun – we can get to the synagogue.

And Jesus, too, will choose us, will deliver us so we may stand up straight and see the sun and praise God.

The challenge is only to not hide. Not to hide behind our rituals and traditions, for when picking apart our rituals and traditions that seek to worship God in turn oppress God's people. They are no longer worship.

To not hide, but to be liberated. To be healed.

The bent over woman is given no name. But Jesus calls her a daughter of Abraham. A child of Abraham. The only other time Jesus uses that title is with Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus, the wealthy tax collector whom Jesus sought and demanded he stay at his house. Jesus calls him a son of Abraham. This man whom Jesus sought, and others rejected and hated.

The children of Abraham are a wealthy tax collector and a disabled woman. Both at the margins of their communities, but both called out to and invited back in by Jesus.

Maybe, just like Abraham, they too model faithful lives in response to God's call.

Who are the children of Abraham we are called to heal. Not to fix – for they are not broken. But to be called back in and liberated

Who are the ones we do not notice, the one who cannot look up because they are held down by what society deems as right and normal and acceptable.

Held down by systems that oppress them. Held down by racism and sexism and ableism and homophobia and the list goes on.

We participate in Christ's healing – this healing that disrupts the status quo and liberates – we participate in this healing when we invite those held down back into the center of our community.

And who knows, like the bent over woman in the synagogue, when we are first liberated from our own neglect, we might even see that they are already here. We just didn't notice.

So, what is it about the bent over woman? Why her? What does she show us about God's kingdom?

Maybe it's as simple as in God's kingdom all are healed. Not fixed, for we are not broken. But liberated to stand up straight, praise God, and then do the holy work we were created for.

And for that, thanks be to God.

Amen.