

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 13:10-17
August 25th, 2019
The Rev. John Forman

Now Jesus 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, 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.

A friend of mine is a registered nurse and a PhD. She is also a holistic nursing pioneer who practices a form of complementary medicine called "healing touch." Healing touch is based on the idea that humans are physical beings with fields of energy that are in constant interaction with other people and with the environment around them. Practitioners use non-invasive hand movements to help re-pattern these energy fields to allow faster healing of the body, mind, and spirit.

The therapy is still somewhat contested. At worst, it does nothing, although evidence does lean in favor of some effectiveness. And so, when Barbie was hired at a new job some years ago, she asked the medical director about using healing touch and was told it was not offered at this hospital.

Barbie didn't make a big deal out of it and yet found the idea coming up in her day-to-day interactions with patients. And if they expressed an interest, she offered to let them experience it. No charge, nothing added to the charts, just a few minutes of attention.

Well, one day, a patient asked Barbie to spend a little healing touch time with her. So, Barbie pulled the privacy curtain around the bed and began. In the meantime, the medical director was walking the floors and noticed the closed curtain. In his curiosity, he pulled back the curtain, saw what Barbie was doing and shouted, "There will be no healing in this hospital!"

Now, as funny and ironic as that is, there's something very similar going on in this passage from Luke's Gospel – something much more nuanced, which means we will have to bear three essential points in mind. First, the author of Luke consistently sets Jesus in his Jewish context. Second, Luke's

Jesus takes a consistent stand in the on-going and high-spirited controversy over how to *practice* as a faithful Jew. And, third, despite our best intentions, you and I consistently act more like the synagogue leader than we might want to admit.

Let me tell you a little about the Jewish context and the controversy in Luke's story. The destruction of the Temple and the exile in Babylon had challenged Judasim to the core. By the time Jesus was born, two Jewish leaders had risen to prominence.

Rabbi Hillel was born in Babylon. He migrated to Israel during the reign of Herod and became one of the most influential forces in Jewish life. Rabbi Shammai was a native of Israel under Roman occupation. And he became Hillel's friendly adversary. While Hillel and Shammai themselves agreed on many basic issues of Jewish teaching, their followers were often in conflict.

Shammai and his followers were concerned that over-exposure to the Romans would weaken the Jewish community, and so they tended toward a strict interpretation of the Torah. The House of Hillel did not share the same level of anxiety about the Romans and so they tended toward a less stringent interpretation of Torah that favored the welfare of the individual.

Jesus was raised as a Jew influenced by the House of Hillel. And it stands to reason that the leader of the synagogue in Luke's story is a Jew influenced by the House of Shammai. And so, the conflict in Luke's reading is not between Jews and non-Jews. It is an in-house difference of opinion between Jews.

The conflict is not between Jesus and the synagogue, as either a Jewish institution or as a congregation. The debate is between a loyally Jewish Jesus and a faithful synagogue leader. Imagine a Lutheran pastor in conversation with an Episcopal priest about apostolic succession and you'll have a good feel for this interaction.

The synagogue leader, you see, has a valid point. What he offers is a clear and compelling reading of the Torah teaching that prohibits Jews from working on the Sabbath; a day for rest and renewal. The negative –sometimes dismissive – attitude that some Gentiles take toward Sabbath restrictions would have been bizarre to the Israelites.

God gave the teachings to the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt – *Egypt*, where Israelites were slaves. God's command to rest, to set aside one day of the week as even God did to rest their bodies and their livestock and retreat for a time of renewal and prayer – Jews still hear this as great advice and a welcome command.

The spiritual giant, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, said: “Six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space; on the Sabbath we try to become attuned to holiness in time. It is a day on which we are called upon to share in what is eternal in time, to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation, from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”

Makes you want to take the Sabbath more seriously, doesn't it? That reverence is what inspires the synagogue leader to protest.

And here's the thing: we all act like the synagogue leader. We all have ways of doing things that we do because that's how we were taught. And we get understandably anxious if people don't respect that.

Some of our opinions are more global, like who we think should be ordained or allowed to be married. Some preferences are denominational, like whether we say “alleluia” during Lent or sing Christmas carols during Advent. Some are quite personal, like our choices around organic or non-GMO foods or our parenting styles.

Whatever they are, there are some teachings that we think should be kept because if we don't, well, who knows what will unravel next? Something like that may be going through the mind of this well-intentioned synagogue leader. Maybe he's uneasy about making exceptions because exceptions can start to erode the teachings until, before you know it, anything goes.

It's just that his isn't the only perspective in the room.

Jesus sees a woman who may be so bent over that she can't see him. She has had “a spirit of infirmity” for 18 years and was not able, Luke's Greek says, “to bend up into all-fullness.” *Eighteen* years. Luke mentions the number twice in this reading and once in the passage just before about the 18 Galileans killed by the falling tower of Siloam. Why eighteen?

First, the number 18 connects two stories. Neither the people killed in the accident nor the bent woman in the synagogue are being punished for sin. And there's a second connection related to the loss of life.

All Hebrew letters have numerical values. *Aleph*, being first, equals one and *bet* is the second letter so it equals two in the Hebrew “alphabet” (and, yes, that's where we get that word). The letter *chet* equals eight and the letter *yod* equals ten. And so, when they are combined, they not only add up to the number 18, they also spell the word “chai,” meaning *life* as in “I'chaim” – “to life!”

The woman has been afflicted by a spirit that is robbing her of a full life. She is most likely a faithful, Torah-abiding member of the synagogue. Despite centuries of sloppy Christian teaching, she is not marginalized, excluded or

ritually impure. She is welcome in her synagogue as a daughter of Abraham, even as an evil spirit binds her and prevents her from functioning at her fullest.

Jesus sees her and calls to her and announces that she has been set free, “loosed,” from her infirmity. Then he lays hands on her and instantly, in Luke’s Greek, she “was straightened,” implying that it was God who straightened her. The only other time that the author of Luke/Acts uses this verb for “straightened” is when God rebuilds the fallen tabernacle of David in Acts.

Through the act of Jesus laying hands on her, God restored what she needed to participate with all the fullness of her life. And so, when I think of the people rejoicing, I like to imagine them yelling, “I’chaim!” “To life!”

The leader of the synagogue is upset because Jesus healed on the Sabbath, but he is mistaken. Like the medical director shouting at my friend, “There will be no healing in this hospital,” there isn’t healing in this story. Or maybe better to say that there isn’t *only* healing because there is so much more. This is about the mystery of the living God’s action as unbinding, of setting free, “loosing,” so that God can straighten us, rebuild us, like David’s tabernacle.

“...being a daughter of Abraham, whom the Accuser has bound for eighteen years,” Jesus says to the congregation, and here, Luke’s Greek is amazing, “was she not *bound* to be *loosed* from this bondage on the day of the Sabbath?”

In other words, shouldn’t this Sabbath be *exactly* the day to unbind her?

This is no occasion for Gentile gloating over the failure of an arrogant, hide-bound Jewish synagogue leader. Jesus acted within Jewish tradition for a daughter of Abraham. God overthrew a powerful evil as Jesus reframed the gift of the Sabbath for all the children of Abraham. Jesus intensified the theology of his Jewish claims about the Sabbath by grounding them in God’s yearning to unbind and restore to fullness.

And that’s cause for us to celebrate with the crowd in awe of the God of our forebears. Because the more God shows up in our awareness, the wider God can draw the circle.

The more our actions and words allow God to unbind human bondages, whether physical, or emotional; social or economic; whether we are bound by prejudice, the need for forgiveness or “the way we’ve always done it” – the more God unbinds and restores, the more of our sisters and brothers can participate in the fullness of life in the community of God’s children.

And one day, we will all cheer joyfully with full hearts: “I’chaim!” “To life!”

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