

August 25, 2019 Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
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GOSPEL

Luke 13:10-17

The holy gospel according to Saint Luke, the thirteenth chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

¹⁰Now [Jesus] was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. ¹¹And 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. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But 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.” ¹⁵But 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? ¹⁶And 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?” ¹⁷When 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.

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Healing stories are common enough in the gospels that they can begin to blend together...They all share common elements. Even among the healing stories we know...there is a whole subset of them that happen on the Sabbath...like today's does.

But their common contours emerge into sharper specificity when we zoom in close. What seems simple from a distance can begin to unfold in front of

us...and sometimes it won't seem to stop...We can just keep zooming in while it folds in on itself...like an MC Escher drawing...more and more complex...

What we hear in Luke today may be a bit like that. We hear the common themes...Jesus is around the religious people...doing something that calls their assumptions into question...pointing to larger truths...more important callings. Someone who has carried a burden for far too long...probably subjected to shame or ridicule is made whole again. There is both indignation and rejoicing.

What is it that Jesus is showing us today? I think it is as simple as it is revolutionary (though it will get more complex the longer we look).

Today Jesus says, in no uncertain terms: There is not a single moment...not a single time or place...when it is unlawful to be set free. The work of liberation is never forbidden.

This is all wrapped up in the complexity of keeping the Sabbath...which is, itself...a countercultural act that is meant to make us more free. Free from equating our worth with our work. Free from unending labor. Free from being so enfolded into our own lives that we never find time to unwrap our attention to reach farther outward...to God and to each other. But it is also a set of rules...a binding thing. Could Sabbath become another captivity? Could the rules of being a good religious person trap us, too? Sometimes constraints are given to us by God as gifts...and sometimes they are imposed by forces that seem indifferent or evil...and we suffer. And sometimes it can be hard to tell the difference.

And just as the religious folks then couldn't quite manage it...neither do we. The captivity we place others in...as well as ourselves...even follows us into spaces meant for healing. Sometimes church is just another place where we wear a face that covers up a part of us we can't share...because of our shame or fear...or worry that we won't really be safe here if we are our whole selves. I even saw this happen at Pride a few weekends ago. A space that was supposed to be radically safe and affirming still couldn't be...Some people didn't come

because of recent acts of public violence. Others took pictures with us...but had to ask people not to post them anywhere public, in case their family might see. There is bondage that we bring with us everywhere we go. There is no one place or time when it disappears. But there is a person who is able to hold it all...to hold us all...to reach past everything that binds us. And he never stops calling into our captivity...to bring us into freedom.

But...there...that's another complicated part. It's a part I didn't see until I zoomed in close. It's a fuzzy part...a blank that has to be filled in. The woman. The one who was bent over and tormented...who had been...for eighteen years. I wonder...what is something you have carried with you in life for that long? Is it something that gives you life? Or something that takes it...like happened to this woman?

I've been thinking about her. About what her life might have been before...and what it had become in the eighteen years before this moment. Imagine (if you haven't experienced it yourself)...going through almost every waking moment of your day...only able to see five steps in front of you. Maybe laying down facing west so you could still get to see a sunset. Imagine living in a time when your illness was understood to be from a spirit...and that spirit was probably assumed to be the result of something you did wrong. It was probably your fault – somehow – that you suffered this way. Either you earned it as punishment...or you didn't have enough faith to fend it off. Imagine...if you haven't experienced it...having to carry the weight of that shame, along with the physical suffering...perhaps many of us don't have to imagine the shame part.

Now imagine being in the synagogue...surrounded by the people who you fear are quietly judging you...or maybe some of them are not so quiet. Perhaps some are truly gracious, though, too. Imagine hearing the visiting rabbi talking...not even knowing what he looked like...only knowing his voice was new. Then imagine...when you're not doing anything at all...that he calls you over from across the room.

Luke doesn't even pause for us to consider this moment...but imagine it. She isn't one of the ones who went looking for healing from Jesus...Her friends didn't come with her to lower her through a roof...She wasn't calling out from a city gate...or reaching out from a crowd to touch him. She might not have even begun to understand who he was. And in those moments after he called her over...and before she got to him...shuffling, maybe...who knows how far? Had it gone quiet? Was her heart racing? Was she bracing for a sermon where she would be the object lesson...the cautionary tale? Or...had she already heard the glimmer of love in the notes of his voice...the resonance of life that echoed from the beginning of time...that vibrated her sternum...but also calmed her tired heart?

We don't know what happened between Jesus calling her over and then saying to her, "You are set free." And...the thing that I love and hate about Scripture...is that those blurry corners we can't quite see are exactly where we most often live.

Perhaps we are captive to spirits that keep us from being able to see more than five steps ahead of us. But Jesus is calling from across the room.

Didn't we just want to be good church folks and show up and hear a comforting word and shuffle back to the life we know...limited as it is? Didn't we just want a brief moment of relief...even if it meant we were still going to have to take our shame with us again when we went? Didn't we just plan on breathing a little deeper for a minute before taking the biggest lungful of air we could and diving back out there again?

Didn't she?

But Jesus calls her up in front of everyone...in her brokenness, in her shame, in her vulnerability. She can't imagine what is on the horizon. She can't see it.

I don't know about you...but so many of the people who have revealed the presence of God to me...are the ones who stood in front of me...broken...vulnerable...and real. It wasn't that they were perfectly put

together that made it feel like God came close. It was because they weren't. And they told about how God had been with them...and it made me believe just a little bit that maybe then God would be with me, too.

Jesus might be calling you up in front of the world, or your friends, or your church, or your family...when you can't see more than five steps in front of you. But the horizon is there. And freedom is coming.

Because Jesus takes shame and replaces it with joy...(And those of us who feel too self-satisfied often end up getting to hold the shame instead...lest we forget the great reversal from Mary's Song that opened Luke's gospel. The mighty are cast down...and the lowly are lifted up. The wise and confident are put to shame...and the ashamed ones are called up, rejoicing.)

Jesus is walking into the broken, bound, shame-filled world and speaking freedom and transformation that we can't even imagine yet. We can't see it. But that doesn't mean it isn't real. We feel broken...but that doesn't mean that Jesus isn't calling out to us. No law stands in the way of the freedom spoken by love. Not then. Not now. Not ever.

Be free. Free others. You don't have to know what it will be. Just follow the voice that speaks love and life. He will transform us in ways we haven't yet begun to imagine.

Hold on to your hats...and thanks be to God. Amen.