

“Taking Another Look at a Familiar Story”

Luke 13:10–17

Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman

First Baptist Church, Raleigh

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The story we have read from Luke is one that we feel like we know, and when I say *we*, I mean *we* church members and *we* preachers. It’s a story which portrays a contrast between Jesus, who heals a woman who has struggled with a crippling ailment for eighteen years, and a leader of the synagogue who criticizes him for breaking a rule by healing on the Sabbath. Good Jesus and bad Jewish leader, Good Christian faith and bad Judaism, we get it, we can check out on this one... Well, as Lee Corso would say, “Not so fast, my friend!”

Luke shapes the story in such a way for us to see a stark contrast, but Jewish practice is not always obsessed with rules, even in Jesus’ time; every faith, including ours, has rules; and if we know our scripture, we know Jesus’ response to the leader of the synagogue points to the fact that even a seemingly straightforward teaching about observing the Sabbath has a complicated history. Not only are there exceptions to the “no work” rule, there are two different rationales given for it in scripture.

I could stop here and ask which two books in the Bible list the so-called Ten Commandments... I know you were all thinking Exodus and Deuteronomy. The lists are essentially the same except for the rationale given for the fourth commandment, the one about remembering the Sabbath. Exodus 20:8-11 says it is to be a day of rest because after creating the world in six days, God rested on the seventh day. But Deuteronomy 5:12-15 says it is a day of rest because God delivered the people from slavery in Egypt.

One text roots the observance in creation while the other roots it in exodus, the latter of which adds a layer of meaning to Jesus’ statement that he has delivered the woman from bondage on the Sabbath. Jesus liberates as God liberates. Furthermore, there is a healing here; it almost gets lost in the aftermath of dispute, but there is a healing. Perhaps the story is worth another look. There is more here than we might think.

A good place to begin is with the story within the story, that is, the healing of the woman who has been crippled for eighteen years. Jesus says the woman has been bound by Satan. From the perspective of modern medicine, we might guess that she has a condition known as ankylosing spondylitis, a fusion of bones in the spine that creates ongoing stiffness, inflammation, fatigue, and pain. But we would still consider this kind of condition that not only causes pain but isolates a person from others a kind of evil.

She cannot look people in the eye because she is bent over, and most likely they have a habit of looking past her. She's been like this for so long, they just ignore her. But Jesus sees the woman, really sees her, like he sees so many people others ignore — Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, the man beside the pool at Bethzatha, the man with the withered hand. Everything else he does begins with his recognition and valuing of the people around him, especially those others fail to notice.

It is a profound need to this day, as described by homiletics professor Jared Alcantara (www.workingpreacher.org). In a world that struggles to pay attention, he says, one does not have to work hard to be unnoticed. A toddler cries out for attention from parents. A middle-aged man walks into a break room and sits down with co-workers who neither acknowledge him nor invite him into their conversation. A teenage girl posts a selfie and none of her friends clicks “like” or posts comments, their silence is deafening, she barely sleeps.

There are so many people no one seems to notice, from the homeless person on the street we look past to the person who sits alone in the coffee shop every time we are there all the way to the elderly friend who lives in isolation. Songs like the Beatles’ “Eleanor Rigby” and John’s Prine’s “Hello in There” are haunting because we see the loneliness they describe all around us. At least Prine’s song adds a word of encouragement to the lament: “So if you're walkin' down the street sometime, and spot some hollow, ancient eyes, please don't just pass 'em by and stare, as if you didn't care, say, ‘Hello in there, hello.’”

That’s what Jesus does. He says, “Hello in there,” he notices people, he sees them. So can we, and even if we have nothing else to offer, just doing this can make a difference.

But Jesus doesn't just see the woman, he heals her. It begins with a spoken word, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment," and it is completed when he touches her, whereupon she immediately stands up straight and begins praising God.

This matter of touch is significant. Jesus doesn't always touch those he heals, but he is willing to touch many people others are not. Like our willingness to notice people, our willingness to touch them speaks volumes about whether we value them or see them as some kind of contagion to be avoided. Who do we hesitate to be near to, much less touch? Who needs this kind of affirmation most desperately?

There are many answers to these questions, but to return to John Prine's concern for the elderly, many isolated older people need not only to be seen but to be touched, in simple ways, a hand on the shoulder, or at times a warm embrace. So often, the only touch they receive is from a medical provider or caregiver. Physical isolation is emotionally isolating. Jesus' willingness to touch the woman in need of healing provides an example for us. Appropriate touch can be healing.

But there is something else we need to notice in this story of healing – the woman does not ask to be healed nor does anyone else plead for her wellbeing. Jesus sees her need and responds. It is a sign of God's generosity and love. The God who is in Christ does not demand anything from us to extend love and compassion, healing and peace. There is a line in the U2 song "City of Blinding Lights" that I love, "Blessings are not just for the ones who kneel... luckily."

This may seem obvious, but it is not. We pray for people and the world, as we should, but sometimes in a way that seems to assume that God can't do the right thing until we tell God what it is. Furthermore, if some people haven't gotten well, we think it's because we haven't prayed often enough or in the right way or because we have been living in such a way as to deny the validity of our requests.

The God we know in Christ doesn't work this way. God's love isn't contingent on our behavior. Jesus heals the woman not because she asks to be healed or is deserving but simply because she is in need.

That is good news for the woman, who stands up immediately, praising God. And it is good news for us. God in Christ is working for

healing and peace when we prayerfully long for God's realm and labor for it, and when we do not. There are no guarantees for specific outcomes in our desired timeframes, and we are called to faithful action, but God is always at work for justice and love, for healing and hope.

All this having been said, Luke's narrative moves past the healing quickly. Jesus heals the woman, she is grateful, but then nothing else is said about her because the focus shifts to the synagogue leader's response. Jesus should not have done this on the Sabbath, he says, there are six days on which he could have done this, six days when he could have achieved the same result without violating the Sabbath law. He is painting a picture of Jesus as a troublemaker, and before we go any further, we ought to acknowledge that this is exactly what he is.

The woman has been disabled for eighteen years. Another day would not make much difference. Jesus knows how this will play out, but he does it anyway. Sometimes he makes trouble on purpose because it needs to be made. Not only does the woman need to be healed, but the synagogue's elevation of rules over people needs to be challenged. All Judaism does not lose perspective like this, but where it does, Jesus challenges it with full awareness of the consequences. Avoiding conflict and keeping a superficial peace are not high on his list of priorities.

We need to pause here. Many people in the church today think we should avoid conflict and keep a superficial peace. "This may be a worthy cause," they say, "but it's just not the right time, it will be divisive." But is it ever the right time for difficult yet needed change? No. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. made this very argument to his colleagues, mostly white, but some black. Among many other insightful things in that letter, he said this.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct action campaign that was 'well timed' in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with

piercing familiarity. This ‘Wait’ has almost always meant ‘Never.’ We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that ‘justice too long delayed is justice denied.’

Indeed! Somewhere else, Dr. King said the time is always right to do what is right. There is plenty of Jesus to back this up!

But returning to the focus of Luke’s story, the problem is that things have gotten out of balance. There are sacred teachings that should be followed to honor God, and there are people with needs who should be cared for, but religious institutions can become so focused on their understanding of certain principles of faith, like remembering the Sabbath, that they forget the people faith is intended to serve. But rather than becoming judgmental about first-century Judaism and self-congratulatory about contemporary Christianity, we would benefit more from honestly addressing our tendency to lose our sense of balance.

For example, consider the Baptist practice of baptism. The historic concern that led to our form of Christian faith was with religious liberty, which begins with the freedom of the individual to respond to God for her/himself. Thus, baptism needs to be of people old enough to decide what they believe. For Baptists, baptism was and is not sacramental or salvific. It is not what saves us; our response to God in Christ is. Yet in many Baptist churches to this day, one cannot become a member unless one has been baptized in the Baptist way, as a believer, and by immersion, which was a much later concern for the first Baptists.

I believe in all the principles of religious freedom, including the Baptist preference for believer’s baptism, but to require those coming from other Christian traditions to be re-baptized our way — which we do not here, thank goodness — seems very much like criticizing Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. Our rules become more important than the faith of the people they are designed to serve.

It’s just one example among many, but in each case our calling is to discern how Jesus would have us balance sacred principles and human needs, the Jesus we see in stories like the one we have read from Luke which still has something to say to us if we are willing to listen, something about healing and making the right kind of trouble.