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Luke 13:10-17
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Last Sunday Fr Rhett spoke of Jesus the rabble rouser and revolutionary, one who does not bring a division that kills, oppresses or separates, but who instead brings a division that gives life, inspires growth and challenges us to love better. And about such division Jesus the rabble rouser and revolutionary did not mince words.

This week we see Jesus as teacher and healer—especially as healer—which might lead us to believe that today we get a quieter Jesus, a kinder, gentler Jesus, someone who cures a long-suffering woman in a quieter, kinder, gentler story.

Maybe. Maybe if the story ended at verse 13 of chapter 13 in Luke's gospel, with the bent over woman healed at last, standing up straight and praising God for her recovery. But. The story doesn't end at verse 13, and so perhaps Fr Rhett and I have our own little sermon series going on. Let's see, shall we?

Jesus heals a lot of people in the gospel of Luke. I forget that sometimes; I usually think of Mark's gospel when I picture Jesus making well, making whole, people who are sick, in body or in mind. But it's true of Jesus in Luke also, men and women, girls and boys, at least 24 of them by my count, half of them cured before that pivotal moment in chapter 9 when Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem, toward his own suffering and death and resurrection, and then 13 more, including a group of 10 lepers, on his way there.

You know many of these familiar characters—a paralyzed man, a man with a withered hand, the centurion's servant, Jairus' little daughter, a woman whose bleeding won't stop, a boy who can't stop convulsing—while each situation is different, all of these suffering people are precious in Jesus' sight.

Because we tend to hear the stories individually, one at a time, we don't necessarily notice the tension growing as the gospel narrative progresses, the conflict increasing as Jesus emerges not simply as a compassionate healer but indeed as a rabble rouser and revolutionary. And why is that? Well, a big reason is because Jesus the compassionate healer dares to break a fundamental commandment of Judaism about not working on the Sabbath, by curing folks on a day specifically set aside for rest and worship. And, as our story for today demonstrates, more than once he breaks that commandment IN the synagogue itself, right in front of the religious leaders, with a Spirit-filled power and authority that threatens their own. They are furious, and now they are watching him like hawks, determined to find some way to catch him out and then to take him out.

So. Lest we think this rising conflict over healing on the Sabbath doesn't have anything to do with any of us, here is what struck me about this particular story of the bent over woman in Luke's gospel in this particular week.

Jesus' work of healing on the Sabbath pits him—and the woman who has been suffering for almost two decades—against a bunch of bureaucrats, religious bureaucrats to be sure, but in this case, healthcare bureaucrats, who are more interested in following protocols and procedures than in addressing human need. The reaction of the leader of the synagogue in which this story takes place might

sound almost comic if what he said weren't so awful. Listen to him: "[He] 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.'" "Come back tomorrow," is what he is saying to a woman who has been living with crippling pain and hoping for a cure for years and years, "the office is closed."

And here's what Jesus, Lord of the Sabbath, says is so awful about the bureaucrat's response. First of all, it's hypocritical. Jesus knows his commandments, and he also knows how the Jewish religious leaders make exceptions in keeping them. He reminds them that they routinely take care of their farm animals by untying them and watering them on the Sabbath, so why would they not make an exception for a human being who also needs care and attention? And what's really, really awful is the suggestion that this woman, who needs to be released, set free, untied, so to speak, from the bondage of her suffering and given the water, so to speak, of new life, is less important than an ox or a donkey. "Have you no shame?" is what Jesus is saying to these bureaucrats.

You know, it's worth noting that the woman with a spirit that had disabled her for 18 years didn't ask Jesus to heal her. Furthermore, he did not, as he does elsewhere in Luke's gospel, ask her if she wanted to be healed. She just suddenly appeared, an unnamed woman in the synagogue without a male relative or friend to accompany her. We actually don't even know if she was aware that Jesus was present, or what she had heard about his healing ministry. Jesus saw her first and interrupted his teaching session to call her over to him. He doesn't

say, “Come back tomorrow, with proof of health insurance, or call my office but not on Friday, or you need to book an appointment in the patient portal, or you can wait for the next cancellation if you want.” He heals her, immediately. “You are set free,” he tells her. Which in my book is the opposite of bureaucracy.

I am the daughter and granddaughter of physicians. I have the utmost respect, appreciation, and frankly, sympathy, for how difficult it is to be in the medical profession, now more than ever. There always have been challenges. My grandfather, a psychiatrist, ran the state mental hospital in Milledgeville for decades; once when the doctors went on strike, he was the sole provider of care for over 2,000 patients. My dad, who started out as a GP in that same small town, used to accept payment in produce from families whose kids had special needs—the children who used to be called retarded—and who didn’t have Medicaid. Those experiences eventually led my dad to become a pediatrician. My grandfather and father didn’t think they were Jesus; they just thought they needed to take care of people. I also suspect that while both of them were regular church goers, they probably weren’t thinking about what the church, if anything, had to do with healthcare.

But this week I have been, because what is in the news about our healthcare system in this country is worrisome, for reasons you all know and perhaps have experienced personally. It’s scary to think that our friends at L’Arche might lose Medicaid support. It’s startling to hear my soon to be 26 year old, healthy niece who is single talk about going without health insurance. It’s frustrating to hear all kinds of stories about bureaucratic nonsense that becomes

nightmarish for aging friends now on fixed incomes. And then there are veterans, and our unhoused neighbors, and on and on.

So I went looking for what our church, The Episcopal Church, has to say about or is doing about healthcare, because, honestly, I didn't know. If you go to the church Web site, you'll find many, many sections that describe the ministries of The Episcopal Church. I didn't find one exclusively devoted to healthcare, though there are many areas that touch on it. There IS a section on healthcare chaplaincy professions, so needed. But I did find this statement, when I googled "healthcare advocacy" on the site.

Here's the opening paragraph, from the Office of Government Relations, a "Summary of Episcopal Church Policy and Advocacy on Healthcare in the United States," dated September 28, 2020:

The Church supports comprehensive health care and recognizes the need for universal and equitable access for all. General Convention urges Episcopalians to advocate for adequate health care, along with nutrition and housing, as human rights that should be provided to all those residing in our nation, including veterans. This advocacy on a number of healthcare asks is viewed as a Church ministry and as a way to promote healthy American communities.

There's more, and I commend the rest to you. In fact, I encourage you to have some prayerful conversations among yourselves about what our witness and practices might or ought to be regarding healthcare in these worrisome, confusing days. Perhaps in a foyer group, or during an adult formation class, or on a Wednesday night, ask the question, "What does Jesus' example as a Sabbath day rule-breaker and healer say to us, as the church? What sort of response might be asked of us?"

At the end of this chapter, chapter 13, the Pharisees tell Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. He offers a response to those bureaucrats that's worth hearing, and perhaps on occasion even emulating. It's goes more or less like this: "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, you, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow and any other day that's necessary, until I declare I am done.'" Thanks be to God for our rabble rousing, revolutionary healer.