

Sunday Sermon August 24, 2024

Today's story of Jesus healing the bent over woman seems rather simple and clear. Jesus was teaching in a synagogue on the Sabbath. Nothing surprising there, a Jewish rabbi would be expected to be found teaching on the Sabbath. In the middle of it, Jesus sees a woman who was suffering and responds. She didn't even have to ask. This happens over and over again in the Gospels. Jesus sees a need and responds.

The religious authorities react by criticizing Jesus for breaking the law and healing on the Sabbath. Jesus faced this kind of criticism all the time: people more concerned about man made rules than they are about the marvelous ways of God.

So this might seem like a rather ordinary Jesus story. But today I'm going to invite you to dig into it, to consider some of the details and what might have been going on beneath the surface, at a deeper level.

First, we note that Jesus was teaching. We might wonder what He was saying - (we are not told) but we know it attracted this woman who had been crippled for 18 years. She steps into the shadows to listen.

Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus was teaching in another synagogue and reading from the Prophet Isaiah, where it says: "God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives." Jesus followed that with: "today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." "Release to the captives" – perhaps that was Jesus' message again today. It's likely that Jesus was teaching about the Kingdom of God – that was His central message – the Kingdom - where captives are set free, and a woman who was standing off on the margins was "called over" by Jesus. Note that: He calls her from where she is hiding in the shadows.

This woman is not part of the inner circle, but she's listening intently. This woman who is carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders. This bent over woman, hears Jesus teaching about how He has come to proclaim release to the captives, and Jesus calls her from the shadows and sets her free. Teaching by word and action.

She might have been an outcast. If she didn't have a living father, or husband or son it would have made her a kind of "non person" in that culture. Or perhaps people blamed her for her condition: "what did you do to deserve that?" Or maybe they labeled her, "O there's the bent over woman" as if she was just her disability.

Jesus calls her, heals her, restores her to community, and proclaims her a beloved child of God: a daughter of Abraham... a daughter of Abraham! God's chosen, who is now set free.

And she praised God. She recognized the source of her healing. She now has a new perspective, a new outlook, a new life. No longer just staring at the ground, she was lifted up and could see.

But the leader of the synagogue did not celebrate. He did not see the inbreaking of God's kingdom bringing freedom and new life. He criticized Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. And Jesus uses that as a teaching moment.

Respect for the Sabbath wasn't just about having a day off to watch football. It was so much more. Keeping the Sabbath was intended to remind God's people that one day a week we should let the world be as God created it to be. One day a week we should not dominate or manipulate it. One day a week, we let the world, and all the creatures God has made, be as they were on the 7th day of creation: beautiful and in perfect harmony.

Sabbath is time to return to the garden to remember that God made humanity in God's image and that everyone has inherent dignity in the eyes of God.

Restoring the bent over woman to new life was the perfect way to celebrate the Sabbath. Restoring her to family and community and recognizing her inherent dignity as a beloved child of Abraham was a Sabbath return to the garden before the fall. Even ox and donkey are set free to be watered on the Sabbath, surely this beloved woman should be set free as well.

By reading and reflecting a little more deeply on today's Gospel story, we begin to see the significance of Jesus' words and action that Sabbath day in the synagogue so long ago.

Jesus made it clear that He had come to usher in God's Kingdom - a new day, a day of freedom for the oppressed, a day of liberation from injustice, a day when the inherent dignity and worth of every human being would be recognized and respected.

So it is no accident that it was a woman that Jesus freed, that it was a woman's burdens that He lifted from her shoulders, because women, then and now, disproportionately carry the burdens.

United Nations statistics reveal that women, who are half of the world's population, work three-fourths of the world's working hours. They receive one-tenth of the world's salary. They own one percent of the world's land. They make up two-thirds of illiterate adults, and together with their dependent children they form three-fourths of the world's starving people.

We see women fleeing violent homelands and violent households with only what they can carry on their backs and their children in tow.

Women and girls suffer from domestic violence, trafficking and prostitution. Women and girls in some of the richest countries in the world are deprived of equal treatment, education and basic human rights.

We can only imagine how the mis-interpretation of "wives be submissive to your husbands" has caused pain and suffering.

Heavy burdens, heavy burdens laid on women's shoulders. Jesus calls those who criticize His setting this suffering woman free on the Sabbath "hypocrites," because hypocrites are those who do not recognize the present evidence of God's kingdom. They do not see God's Kingdom in their midst.

God's kingdom came to the synagogue that day so long ago, when Jesus lifted up that precious child of God who was carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders and set her free.

Jesus came to usher in a new day, a day when no one would be labeled second-class and shoved aside to the shadows, but when the lowly would be lifted up.

May we, who follow in Jesus' footsteps and pattern our lives on his, always do the same. May we join God in ushering in a new day. A day of freedom for the oppressed. A day of liberation from injustice. A day when the inherent dignity and worth of every child of God is recognized and respected.

Amen