

Sermons at Christ Church

Love, Re-Imagined

Pentecost XI

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You are the peace of all things calm. You are the place to hide from harm. You are the light that shines in dark. You are the heart's eternal spark. You are the door that's open wide. You are the guest who waits inside. You are the stranger at the door. You are the calling of the poor. You are my Lord and with me still. You are my love, keep me from ill. You are the light, the truth, the way. You are my Savior this very day. Amen.

Broken. Beaten. Out of shape. Thirsty. Helpless. She has been dealing with this ailment for the past eighteen years. You and I can only imagine the number of doctor visits she may have had if she lived in Columbia or any other American city. We can only imagine the worry and anxiety that she daily wears on her face. I don't know what it is about incurable diseases but those rip you apart and push you to be inward looking. You lose hope in all things positive. There's the tendency to believe that we have been abandoned. Like the woman in the story, you become bent out of shape and cannot stand straight. You don't only look down, but you are drawn to desperation. Of the many things that she couldn't do, one thing that she could do was to be in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

And while in the synagogue, she didn't go out to seek Jesus. How could she have even seen the healer and attracted his attention when her stature was such that she could not look up but down? It was as if she carried with her the weight of the world. She had become trapped amidst the dearth of remedy for whatever ailment she had.

The healer sees her and is moved by compassion. He knew that wasn't what this woman was created to be. I knew you before you were formed in the womb, the prophet reminds us. And for the sake of my knowledge of you, let me restore you to the person that you were created to be. For the sake of my knowledge of you let me heal you of your ailment. You were made for greatness, to live life to its fullest. I know your very being and existence sing of God's glory. I know you were made to proclaim the glory of the Lord. Yes, there are times when circumstances may convince us that we are incapable of exuding God's glory.

The prophet Jeremiah and before him the patriarch Moses, all gave excuses as to why they may not be the best people to carry God's word. But we tend to forget that God uses-even our inadequacies, shortfalls and our diseases, if you will, to assure us of His graciousness and to proclaim His glory.

Remember, the woman didn't ask for healing. Her mission in the synagogue that morning was not to meet Jesus. Her mission was to keep a community ritual, but more than that, she was there to say her prayer to the God of her life. Sabbath was a day to rest and to honor God, and that was exactly what she went to the synagogue to do. Her ailment has had a debilitating effect on her so she can only look down or slightly ahead but never upright without some difficulty. She can only turn from side to side to see what those who stand upright can see with just a glance. And because she couldn't stand straight to see upright, she didn't even notice the presence of the healer. The healer on the other hand isn't constrained in anyway, he sees her, connects with her, affirm the essence of her being, touches her by laying his hand upon her and makes her whole. That ailment for which she had been struggling for eighteen years is gone. Completely and totally gone. In gratitude, she begins to praise the God in whose honor she went to the synagogue.

See, if you have not been there before. If you have not been left totally helpless. If your world has never been turned upside down, you will not understand this woman's praise. If you have never been set free from that which has taken you captive, be it illness, anxiety, anger, pride and rigidity, you may not understand this woman's praise. If you have always been at the top and never been at the bottom, you may not understand this woman's praise. If life has always been kind to you, you may not understand this woman's praise. But if you have ever been at the bottom. If you have ever felt shackled by the terrors of life. If you have ever felt captive by an illness or disease, you know what it means to sing when you are set free from that which diminishes and takes away your dignity and pride. See, you have more than enough reason to praise. There is a story about a spouse who couldn't contain his joy when he heard that the wife was cancer free. His questions was, how do I do the happy dance? Being free meant she could more than praise the God for whom she was at the synagogue to worship on that Sabbath day. Being free meant that she could do the happy dance. But there's a problem.

She was healed on the Sabbath day. And that is a problem. I love rules but I am not a Sabbath person. And so one of the challenges that I have had throughout my entire ministry is observing the Sabbath. The Sr. Warden said to me a few days ago that they may have to change the locks on my office door-get a more sophisticated lock with a timer that wouldn't open the doors on Fridays.

But in as much as I love the law, rules and conventions that orders a society and guides our common life, I believe strongly that any law, or rule or convention that cripples you in doing what is right, that hinders you from doing good or being compassionate, is troublesome. I am the kind who prefers to err on the side of compassion than any rule. St. Augustine said that "an unjust law is no law at all." And In his Letter from Birmingham jail, Dr. King echoes that same principle when he writes "One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws." Please don't hear me say that the Sabbath is an unjust law because it is not. However, the overarching question for Jesus was whither the Sabbath law or the healing grace for Abraham's daughter. Whither the spirit of the law or the letter of the law. One of our parishioners tells a story of an Orthodox Jewish family that had a medical emergency at home but wouldn't call 911 because it was Sabbath. Rather, they run out of their home, approached this parishioner's daughter and asked the stranger to call 911 for them.

The law that no one was to work on the Sabbath isn't a problem, but the application. Animals need water on the Sabbath and so people led their animals to get a drink. The questions is, if it is cruel to make animals suffer without water all day, how is it then a problem to heal on the Sabbath? How is it a problem to heal a woman who had suffered for eighteen years? See, the issue wasn't the law itself, but it was about the selective application of the law by the very people who had no issue providing their animals with water on the Sabbath. That is why Jesus wonders, how come you untie your animals and take them for a drink, but have an issue with a daughter of Abraham being healed? Who is of more value, your animals or this woman? In so far as any child of Abraham is of more value than any animal and all things material, the Sabbath then is about resistance.

It is about resisting the unequal application of the law. It is about resisting the anxiety induced culture which causes needless worry. It is about resisting a social life that feeds coercion and competition. It is about resisting any temptation to choose between God and mammon. The Sabbath is about resisting any attempt to adulterate compassion for the sake of upholding a law. The Sabbath is not entirely about inaction it is about an act of resisting any attempt at diluting human dignity.

The nature of Jesus was one in which he was more concerned about helping people than he was about keeping rules. Rules are good, but people are more important. Religion is more than just following rigid rules; it is about loving God and helping others discover their purpose in life and in God.

Broken. Beaten. Out of shape. Thirsty. Helpless. The truth is, it is not only the woman who needed healing, you and I and our world need that kind of restorative healing. What fascinates me about the story is that the woman didn't look upon her circumstance as an excuse not to honor God on the Sabbath. She kept going. You never know when your miracle will occur. Keep pressing. The Lord sees you, and it is He who will invite you, touch you and restore you to glory so you can also do the happy dance. Amen.