

Sermon Pentecost 11C 25/08/2019

Luke 13:10-17

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you saints of the Living God from Abba Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit. '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. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God.' Let's pray:

One of the things I love about this place, is the many wonderful opportunities I get to sit down and have a cuppa' and a chat with many of you. You are alert and engaging. You sit attentively, look me in the eye, and we chat, laugh, and debate about all sorts of things. And you handle your tea and biscuits like professionals which is more than I can say for myself (just ask Tony Dewar about the time I spilt a whole cup of coffee down the front of his shirt). There's no difference between us. Nothing is out of place, that is, until you stand up.

That's when the years seem to drop on your bodies like a heavy weight, borne about your shoulders, crushing weight bearing down upon years of accumulated burden. Deterioration of the spine, years of degenerative disease, surgery, stress and injuries have taken their toll and it leaves many of you bent and broken. As you stand, the sparkle in your eyes gives way to drawn breath, more with intense labour than casual ease. I'd love to attach a string to your head, like a marionette puppet, and pull you up straight. But your body is rigid, not limp, gripped with pain, bent in agony. Doctors can treat you, but they can't cure what bends you to the point of breaking.

As I studied this text for today, I thought of you and wondered if your future is my future. I think of you and pray for you, body and soul. I also say a little prayer for myself, thankful that I'm not bent and broken to the extent many of you are. But the moment I think this, I know that I'm lying. The truth is that I try to hide my bent and broken nature from all but the most trained of eyes, perhaps sometimes visible only to the eyes of God.

"Bent and broken nature" is the language we use to describe sin. Sin is the inescapable sickness borne by all human beings since the fall of Adam and Eve. The effects of sin leave us bent, broken, misshapen, not the way we were made to be, and not fit for our intended purpose. The truth is, we are all bent like the woman in our Gospel for today. We are literally bent over, out of shape, lacking the original righteousness bestowed upon our first parents in Paradise.

And to reinforce sin's grip on us, Luke tells us that the woman is not only "bent over" but also "bound". The only hope of freedom for the woman; in fact, the only hope of freedom for us is Jesus' action of "untying." The Greek word used is "λύω" [(loo'-o) to loose, untie, release]. Jesus "sets the woman free" [v12]; he reminds his critics that they also "untie" their animals on the sabbath so they can drink [v 15]; Jesus reminds us that he has just "freed" or "loosed" the woman from bondage [v 16].

Now, while words like "bondage" and "slavery" will upset the PC social justice warriors, they obviously forgot to send a memorandum to Jesus. Jesus identifies the root of the woman's bent shape, as a bondage. But as the story continues, we find that the woman is not the only one affected. The ruler of the synagogue is also enslaved by the same force, though the symptoms look different: the woman is



visibly crippled, while the man has a spirit distorted by a false sense of religious piety.

We learn that Jesus sets the woman free, but what about the leader of the synagogue? Was he also set free by Jesus' words? We can all see the weight of a spirit of illness that pushes down on a person. We all recognise the demons of addiction that drown people in their own desperate search for relief from life's pain. We might experience the "black dog" of depression that traps a person in shame and self-loathing. But what can we do about the spirits of personal virtue for religious justification? Are we aware enough of these demons to see the weight of their pride bending us out of shape, making us creatures that want God's laws to serve us rather than the opposite? Are those of us bent up by the hidden demons of "right doctrine" or "clean living" also set free by Jesus?

The answer is yes! Why? Because the woman didn't come seeking Jesus for healing. He saw her and called her over. He set her free because he chose for her to be free. In Jesus, God is doing all of that for all of humanity. God doesn't wait for us to come to some understanding of our bent shapes. God joins us in the very depths of our possession. God, in Christ Jesus, takes on the full weight of our sin and experiences our "brokenness" on the cross, and renders its power meaningless over us, even when we still seem intent on holding on to it. Even though the ruler of the synagogue was embarrassed by Jesus, maybe he too eventually recognised that the woman's liberation on the sabbath could be his liberation as well.

All of this comes back to the question of what the sabbath day is for. There are many answers. We have sabbath by God's command as a day of rest. St Augustine added to that answer when he prayed, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O Lord." Perhaps it is out of longing for God that we have the sabbath. The Lutheran in me

suggests that sabbath involves something deeper than just resting in God's presence. God does something for me on the sabbath. God meets me and transforms me on the sabbath. God unties me and sets me free.

Our worship services are designed to help us understand just that. We begin in the waters of our baptism by invoking the name of God, confessing to him our sinfulness, and receiving his holy forgiveness. It's in our baptism that God's liberating word first comes to us, and here that our weekly journey reconnects us to that word. In joy, we gather and sing with other Christians, also once bound. We drink from the sweet cup of God's liberating word, read and spoken as by Christ himself. We speak of our commitment to the world and its healing in prayer, and we begin to feel the weight bending our lives lifting from our shoulders. We rejoice at the table as we consume the Living Word bodily, giving us a foretaste of the feast of freedom that's to come. We're blessed as finally, set free by Jesus, we're set loose on the world, where the freedom we have experienced becomes the freedom we practice.

And pervading it all, is God, the God of freeing, life-giving grace. God meets us in worship, frees us from the weight of our sin, binds us together in community, and sets us loose upon the world.

But, before we become too giddy with our new found freedom, I'll remind you that we'll be back again next week. We'll need God's "loosing" yet again, from the shackles of our sin. It will always be that way until God's kingdom finally comes among us fully in Christ. But at least we have gained a glimpse of what God is about with the sabbath. We taste, we see, we are touched and transformed by the boundless love and grace of God. The result is wholeness, however fleeting for now, an appetiser of the cosmic wholeness that God has promised to all creation.

Now we are free for one more thing: honesty. We can be honest about how we are bent and broken. We can be honest about the bondage that enslaves us. We no longer have to walk by unnoticed. Jesus sees us, invites us over like the woman, lays his hands on us, and sets us free. Rejoice, Brothers and Sisters, stand up straight and praise God for all the wonderful things Jesus is doing in your lives. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.