

The 11th Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: August 21, 2022

Proper 16: Luke 13: 10-17: *A Crippled Woman Healed on the Sabbath*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit! Amen.

I want to encourage you to do something. If you have never read Victor Hugo's memorable novel the "Hunchback of Notre Dame," pick up a copy and read it. Hugo uses an interesting literary technique in the story. The reader can see the basic decency and humanity of Quasimodo, the hunchback, while the crowd sees him only as a monstrous freak. The story, in its essence, is part tragedy, and part hope.

It is not surprisingly that this text, comes from Luke's Gospel. This story also, is part tragedy and part hope. Luke is the only Gospel writer who records this event in the life of Christ. But Luke, being a physician, would have been drawn to a story like this. He does not go into a lot of detail. In only three verses he tells us that there was a woman who was a hunchback. We do not know her name; we do not know her family background. We know that she

has had this condition for eighteen years. The implication is that she had not been born with it. Perhaps it was a calcium deficiency, a spinal injury, or genetic, or some extreme case of osteoporosis. We don't know. We are simply told that a spirit has crippled her. Jesus called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your infirmity." We are told that she suddenly stood erect and began praising God.

I am not quite sure what to make of this spirit, but in some way, it is responsible for this woman's tragic circumstances. As we take a closer look at this story there are other spirits at work. Look at them with me. There is at work a crippling spirit.

Because of her ailment she was bent over, and her eyes were always facing the ground. She missed the sky, the birds, and the rainbow. But physical ailments can do far more than bend a back. It can rob us of our livelihood and cause bankruptcy. It can take us away from our families. It can even cause severe depression. That is what is so disturbing about the synagogue ruler. He was so insensitive to this woman's plight. Sure, he had the truth on his side. Healing is work and it should not be done on the Sabbath. But, Jesus had a greater principle on his side—compassion. Compassion trumps ritualistic rules, even the Sabbath commandment.

For this reason, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue: You hypocrite. Do you not take care of your animals on the Sabbath? Isn't this woman, a daughter of Abraham, a daughter of the covenant, of more value than they? What Jesus is saying is that restrictions, laws, rules, and institutions can, if we are not careful, keep us from rising to the heights of charity to which we are called. There is no inappropriate time to express compassion. Love God love your fellow man——then you can toss out your 635 scribal laws.

The first spirit at work has attacked a woman. She has been bent physically. The second spirit has also attacked this woman, but not physically. It has attacked her spiritually. She has been attacked by a spirit, which has crippled her soul.

Listen to the details as Luke relates them. He tells us that this was the Sabbath. The key to understanding what really is happening here. He also tells us that this woman had her condition for eighteen years. Both these points are important. What he is saying here is: this was not an emergency case. It was the same with the man with the withered hand, whom Jesus also healed on the Sabbath. This man had probably been born with this condition. It easily could have waited until the next day. Both of these cases could have waited to the next day. These were not emergency room situations. On the

other hand, if Jesus had healed say a child who was burning up with fever and in imminent danger of dying, it would have made perfect sense even to the synagogue ruler. But that kind of healing would have undermined the point he was making. You see this was a test. Jesus was purposely and flagrantly breaking scribal law to make a point, and that point was: people are more important than rules. We need to remind of this from time to time.

This synagogue ruler did not see it that way because he had dehumanized this woman. Once you dehumanize someone, and label them, you can easily dismiss them. Two things happen when you have a legalistic spirit. 1. Your rules rule you and 2. Your rules supersede the well-being of others.

There was a certain man who went through the forest seeking any bird of interest he might find. He caught a young eagle, brought it home and put it among the fowls and ducks and turkeys, and gave it chicken food to eat even though it was the king of birds.

Five years later, a naturalist came to see him and, after passing through the garden, said ‘That bird is an Eagle, not a chicken.’

‘Yes’ said the owner, ‘but I have trained it to be a chicken. It is no longer an eagle.’

‘No,’ said the naturalist, ‘it is an eagle still; it has the heart of an eagle, it has the wingspan of an eagle, and I will help it soar high up in to the heavens.’

‘No,’ said the owner. ‘it is a chicken and will never fly.’

They agreed to test it. The naturalist picked up the eagle, held it up and said with great intensity. ‘Eagle thou art an eagle; thou dost belong to the sky and not to this earth; stretch froth thy wings and fly.’

The eagle turned this way and that, and then looking down, saw the chickens eating their food, and down he jumped.

The owner said; ‘I told you it was a chicken.’

‘No,’ said the naturalist, ‘it is an eagle. Give it another chance tomorrow.

So, the next day he took it to the top of the house and said: ‘Eagle, thou art an eagle; stretch forth thy wings and fly.’ But again, the eagle, seeing the chickens feeding, jumped down and fed with them.

Then the owner said: ‘I told you it was a chicken.’

‘No,’ asserted the naturalist, ‘it is an eagle, and it has the heart of an eagle; only give it one more chance, and I will make it fly tomorrow.’

The next morning, he rose early and took the eagle outside the city and away from the houses, to the foot of a high mountain. The sun was just rising, gilding the top to the mountain with gold, and every crag was glistening in the joy of the beautiful morning.

He picked up the eagle and said to it: ‘Eagle, thou art an eagle; thou dost belong to the sky and not to the earth; stretch forth thy wings and fly.’

The eagle looked around and trembled as if new life were coming to it. But it did not fly. The naturalist then grabbed its head and made it look straight at the sun. Suddenly it stretched out its wings and, with the screech of an eagle, it flew out of his hands and mounted higher and higher and never returned.

Though it had been kept and tamed as a chicken, it was an eagle.

You see. You take us humans and put us among the turkeys and chickens in this world and give us rules to live by and tell us that we are moral people so long as we live by those rules, and we will contently live out our lives in meager existence. But you let someone like Christ come along, straighten our backs, and point our head toward the heavens, and then suddenly we realize we are sons and daughters of Abraham. We are God’s chosen people. We are not chickens; we are eagles!

Society has a way dehumanizing us. When we allow this to happen, we fail to see our worth before God. The hunchback was, in the synagogue ruler's opinion, only a woman and of little value. The Mosaic Law was more important than a woman let alone a disfigured one. Listen to this now: This woman's back was bent, that much is true. But, a legalistic spirit bent this man's soul even more.

Nothing can choke the heart and soul of our walk with God like legalism. I am the first person to say that a Christian ought to be disciplined. But, when we become rigid in our beliefs it is a definite sign that the Disciplines of the Christian life have crippled us.

Does this mean that we do not have to have rules? Of course not. But it does suggest that we must be careful and not let our rules rule us. Jesus said: The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Jesus comes to us as the restorer of humanity. God sees each of us as a unique individual precious to him. This brings us to the third spirit at work in this story. It is the spirit of joy.

Remember the scene with me. You have Jesus who has been invited on the Sabbath to address the congregation. You have the synagogue ruler off to the side who has invited him. Then you have the congregation who has heard so

much about this young man from Nazareth and they are excited to have him there in their hometown synagogue. That's the scene. The stage is set. Enter stage left a hobbled frail woman who is known throughout the small community. They call her the cripple. Luke doesn't even name her. She is simply the hunchback. She does not address Jesus. The Scriptures tell us that when Jesus saw her he called her forward. He takes the initiative and tells her she is set free. She is healed. Just like that. After 18 years she is freed from that which bound her. At this I am convinced the entire town, present at the synagogue that morning, wanted to shout with joy but the ruling authorities shut it down and that's a shame.

Sometimes you simply have to express joy. Because of a healing, or an accomplishment, or a victory, you have to shout thank you to God.

I'll tell you how. It is because you are surrounded by people who take joy in the well doing of others. It's because you have a mother like Linda; you have a spouse a spouse who supports you, and children who love you. It is because you have coaches and friends who are interested in your well-being. They don't pick you apart at every turn. And then a little miracle of healing doesn't hurt either.

Never count people out. If they are sick, heal them. If they are down on their luck, assist them. If they are not up to a task, teach them. If they have a burden, lift it. If they have failed, encourage them. Jesus provided for this woman what no one else could have given her -- a whole body. He healed her. Now, there is no way the synagogue ruler could have healed this woman's back, but the very least he could have done was show her some respect and provide her some dignity and at the very least celebrate with her. Let me make it clear that this story points to Jesus as the Messiah. That's the reason Luke is telling us this story. But there is another lesson, I think, Jesus would have us learn from these events in the synagogue: We cannot all be healers, but we can treat one another like sons and daughters of Abraham. As people who have worth in the eyes of God. My friends, this will give you, and me, a spirit of joy!

There are spirits at work in this world. Which spirit is at work within you? Is it a crippling spirit? Is it a legalistic spirit? Or, is it a spirit of joy? Whichever it is, will make all the difference in your life and in the life of others. Amen.