

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
11th Sunday after Pentecost
August 25, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Proverbs 3:1-8

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And 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. But, the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, 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." But, the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Sabbath Work?

During my time in my first career as an orthopedic surgeon, I specialized in spine surgery. Many people came to me anticipating a recommendation for a reconstructive procedure. Others were looking for a more specific diagnosis: a consultation. One really interesting man came to my office on about three or four occasions. He was an entrepreneur, an inventor, and a highly successful business owner. Really, he was one of a kind. He had a particular spine problem, and he wanted it investigated thoroughly. This fellow had lots of questions, and he wanted all of them answered thoroughly. So my staff would give him the last appointment of the day to allow for this "open-ended" appointment. Usually, a session lasted up to an hour.

Being someone who enjoyed the details of any topic, this patient always anticipated going over the X-ray images of his spine. Then he would offer his opinion of the problem from an engineering viewpoint. His suggestions for treatment were a direct response to his practical experience. Even though there were tremendous amounts of biomechanics and engineering principles which supported my recommendations for treatment, this fellow would place his own "spin" to a solution. At the same time, he made it plain that he was not going to undergo any surgery or any other procedures.

As you might gather, he and I were talking to each other about the **same thing**, his physical problem. But, our **perspective** was quite different. And, our solutions were not “in synch.” It was a marvelous experience for me. I’m really not sure what this fellow thought of it all at the end of the day.

Well, there is something like this going on at the end of the **scripture lesson**. The scene started in a synagogue, moved quickly to the appearance of the afflicted woman, who became the center of the story. She is bent over with pain, or as the Greek literally states it, she was unable to straighten to her full height. The plight of the woman soon became the focus of attention for the local religious authority, the leader of the synagogue, and Jesus of Nazareth. As we might expect, the woman was healed in an astounding **miracle**. But, what follows for us is a squabble over the rules of the **sabbath**, the time set aside to honor and worship God. Jesus has encountered resistance to his ministry previously in his mission activity. In fact, the author of *Luke* offers a succession of stories around the synagogue, and this one features the most **controversy**.

Jesus does not back down, and emphasizes **the sovereignty of God**, and aligns himself with God, just as a **prophet** would do. Even beyond that, Jesus identifies himself as **God’s Son**, which a prophet would **not do**. For many, this borders on blasphemy. Because, Jesus is God’s Son, he tells all who would listen that he has come to this world on the behalf of the frail, the defenseless, and those in pain: Essentially, the **outcasts** of a rigid society. Of course, he includes this woman who is bent over and **seeking Jesus**. The rules of the sabbath seem straight forward to the leader of the synagogue. But, Jesus points out that the woman, who is bent over and not “straight” at all physically, is also in a moral and legal sense **undeserving** of this condition. She is a daughter of Abraham, and deserving of God’s attention. In these verses, Jesus sees a major problem and a **teaching moment**. The conflict comes from the leader of the synagogue, who sees only the rule of the **religious law**.

Now, many would depart from the theme we are addressing this morning in order to dissect this story along the medical lines of **illness**. This comes out of our assumptions as modern “folk” with several hundred years of science and medicine informing us that this woman has a **painful problem**, likely involving something in her spine or abdomen. Any number of diagnoses could come to mind. But, in many ways the setting is a **departure** from our experience, as well. Few Presbyterian congregations, or their pastors, will take on the healing of physical ailments. Certainly, it is unlikely that we will cast out a demon this morning or cure anyone’s physical problem with a laying on of hands. Today, God provides for us in other ways with **more practical means** to approach physical ailments through the knowledge and skills of our healthcare workers and technology. Personally, I see these extraordinary developments in healthcare as an extension of the **power of God** to work miracles in modern times.

But, in our world, and in our walk through life, are we so different from those assembled at the **synagogue** in Palestine on a sabbath day? Like those with Jesus, would we not prefer that things remain **predictable** and orderly? In Presbyterian terms we call this keeping things “decent and in good order.” We like that phrase so much that it is in our *Book of Order*, our “rules of engagement,” if you will. But, something else is going on and it is Jesus that points it out to us.

In our scripture lesson today, Jesus asked everyone present to look into their own hearts to see if they recognized this **inrush of the work of God**. In other words, did anyone besides Jesus see that God was going to do a **new and good thing** in this setting? Remarkably, the challenge does not stop there. Do you and I understand those moments when **God's Spirit** is making **demands** on us, even when we think better of it or even ignore it altogether? In essence, Jesus is asking if you and I are responding to God's **demand** on our living?

In our scripture lesson, the woman seeks out Jesus and makes a **significant demand** on him. She wants to be cured of her condition. In turn, Jesus makes a demand on **the law**, which has come from God: these **rules** on keeping the Sabbath. With all of these things swirling around, elements of the passage can be taken a number of ways. Although Jesus specifically mentions Satan and implies the presence of evil and sin in addressing those before him, the focus is certainly **not on Satan**, or even on sin. Attention is directed to **the power of God** which is present **in Jesus**. And, we need to understand that what happens in these verses is a triumph of God's **power and love** over the "rule of law." As difficult as that can be for each of us, Jesus is saying that the law is well and good, but if we keep the law, any law, rigidly, we run the unforgivable risk of **ignoring** the work of God. The take-away lesson here is this: **Christ frees us** from that burden, just as he **freed the woman** in our story from hers.

Jesus is pointing out, among many things, that it is this **burden** of keeping the law which causes us to lose sight of **the plight** of individual people and their **needs**. It is a struggle between seeking salvation on one hand and accepting that we are **saved** and free to do **God's work** on the other. It is the difference between keeping a great mass of laws and proclamations and accepting **God's love and forgiveness**, even if we do not deserve it. We call this God's **grace**.

As an act within that **gift of grace**, it is God's **Word**, God's power, in Jesus Christ that **heals** the woman and allows her to face the world **upright**- straight, as we are told. This echoes our scripture from *Proverbs*:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.

In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.

It will be a healing for your flesh and a refreshment for your body.

Proverbs 3:5-8

Christ brought a **new path** to God, **independent** of the law, which brought in those outside of the temple worship: **the outcasts, the unclean, the diseased**. Now, through Christ and God's mercy and grace they could **approach God**. And, in the process, the path is opened for those **outside the Jewish faith**: the **Gentiles**. So, unless you were raised in the Jewish faith, this means **you-** and **me!** Until Christ came, the Romans and Greeks, the Syrians, and the merchants, and traders, and tax collectors had been kept at **arms length** by those who believed in God. These **outsiders**, the Gentiles, could hang around the synagogues and even the outer courts of the temple in Jerusalem, but they could not be among the people of God in worship. And, these were the very people, the **Jewish faithful**, who were working so hard to keep all of those **religious laws**. Instead, with **Christ** there is a new means of **knowing God**. It is **God's sovereignty and God's power** that makes **salvation possible** in Jesus Christ. That is the same power of **salvation** that **continues** to us today.

Certainly, we should honor the rules of the **Sabbath**. Jesus confirms that. But, Jesus is saying, also: Let's be as **practical** about sin and healing as we are when we are taking care of our domestic animals! We feed and water them on the same day that we give them rest, glorifying God and offering goodness and a sense of wholeness for the animals and ourselves. Like the animals we take care of God wants us to **take care** of ourselves: We should rest. But, Jesus goes on to say something else: Sometimes, we have to **re-order** our thinking.

Often, this is **not easy**. This reminds me of my training as a medical student and as a surgeon. We learned pretty quickly that **disease never takes a holiday**. No matter what day of the week or what time of night, **things go wrong** for human beings. And, suddenly they require specific, expert care. Certainly, for the woman with the affliction in our scripture lesson this morning, disease never took a day off. She was in **constant distress** with her condition. Her only hope at that point was the man named **Jesus**. He was at the synagogue, surrounded by people. Sabbath observance, or not, she would at least **see him** and make her condition **known to him**. **She acted boldly!** And, that was not what a woman was supposed to do in Jewish society.

In a similar way, **Jesus** was not shy about demonstrating his point. He **publicly shamed** the most important person in the religious life of the village. Then, he turned around and performed a **healing** on the Sabbath. **He redefined** the concept of **work** into something that is obviously **ministry**: Jesus is working. But, he is performing **a good work!**

In the same way, one aspect of this scripture lesson is that **good works** are **expected** of each and every one of us. In our text, Jesus **opens our eyes** to new concepts and ideas, even in the midst of orthodox, or truly rigid, behavior. And, this was the problem which seemed to **oppose** the works of God on a sabbath day in Palestine. **God broke** into the **routine of life** at a synagogue on the Sabbath through a woman in need of **help** and a man we know as **Jesus**, who now is the **Risen Christ**.

Today, you and I observe our sabbath on Sunday. If possible, we gather at our place of worship, this church. While we are here, **Christ is asking** if you and I will open ourselves to the **call of God**. Through the power of the Gospel, **Christ** breaks in on our life of stability and certainty and loudly **proclaims something else**. Does our orthodox, or rigid form, of everyday living block out **God's breaking-in** on our routine of living? Is our concentration on being right excluding God's call and **the claim of God** on our very **lives**?

In this scripture lesson, **Jesus is teaching** his followers, and some astonished people at a local synagogue, that there is a definition of work, certainly. But, he makes it clear there are also **important works** to be performed. Our scripture lesson asks us to **examine ourselves** and our faithful living. Like the woman before Jesus, are you and I **bent over double, unable to see** what is straight **in front** of us? Can we let God work to **straighten us** and greet the world and make the **changes** needed to **bring life** to us, but also to **show us the world** which is waiting to greet and commune with us?

Pray and hope that we are able to see that **change must come** from within each of us, as **directed by God**. And, that change will come from God, because **Christ demands that much** from each one of us.

