

# WHAT'S HOLDING YOU BACK?

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A Sermon preached for North Presbyterian Church

On August 25, 2013 by Cathy M. Kolwey

In our exploration of the book of Luke during the month of August, we have been studying Jesus through both his chronological journey to Jerusalem, and his metaphorical journey to bring about the Kingdom of God. Over the last few weeks, we have look at how the gospel of Luke portrays Jesus and we have used words like “counter cultural” and “anti-establishment” to describe his ministry to those marginalized by the society. Clearly, Jesus wants to lift up those in society that culture values less: the widows, the orphans, the ill and the weak.

Today our scripture takes us one step closer to Jesus getting to Jerusalem; which, of course also means that we are one step closer to bringing about the Kingdom of God as well. Today we meet Jesus in the synagogue. He is there as the guest leader. And listen to what happens in the scripture as he goes about teaching the people:

## **Luke 13:10-17**

Now Jesus 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.

What I love most about this miracle story is that there are three clear archetypal characters in the story, and each of them can teach us something about the coming of the Kingdom of God. First, there is the bent over woman. She has no name, she doesn't need one. She represents all people who are crippled with illness, who are in need of healing. She is every one of us in some way. Broken, seized by infirmity, bent by the weight of the burden. And Jesus touches her, and she is freed. She responds as any person of faith would do. She praises the Lord. She stands up straight and immediately starts praising God for the miracle in her life. She is an archetype for how we should respond, as Christians, to God's redemptive love in our lives. We should stand and praise God.

The second character in the story is the synagogue leader. He is archetypal of a different type of faith. He is an achiever, a rule follower, a type A personality that wants to get it right. He is unsettled by what Jesus does in performing the miraculous healing of the woman. It is important to remember, though, that he was following God here too. His vision of God comes straight from the book of Deuteronomy, which says it is unlawful to work on the Sabbath. He is trying to follow God's rule, so we shouldn't be too critical with him. He is just following what he has been taught; he just doesn't have the larger vision of the coming Kingdom that Jesus does. Unfortunately,

the synagogue leader has been taught a set of religious rules that have been manipulated to be self-serving to the religious leaders of the time. They were not necessarily enacted out in the way they were originally given to the people.

And then there is Jesus, the Radical. Jesus is the catalyst that is bringing freedom and liberation here. Let's think about how Jesus is causing a shift in the culture with this seemingly innocent miracle performed to heal a woman that had suffered for 18 years.

Jesus, as the teacher in the synagogue, would have been seated front and center.

In the deformed condition in which the bent over woman had found herself for so long, she would have been religiously marginalized. People with such conditions were not allowed in the temple, period. It's a bit surprising she was even allowed inside the synagogue, and perhaps she would not have been there except for the fact that Jesus was teaching that day. In the synagogue, she would have been seated near or at the very back of the room, with the other women, who were not permitted to participate actively in the worship offered up front by the men. Indeed, they were not even supposed to speak.

So when Jesus sees this woman and calls out to her while he is teaching, every eye in the place is transferred from him to her, from the very front and center to the very rear, from the one most valued to the one least valued. Jesus reinforced this shift by walking through the male worshipers and then into the area where the women were gathered in the back and laying his hands on her. Immediately, she stood up straight and began praising God; that is, worshipping—out loud! A woman who had been crippled for eighteen years was now standing (like the men) and praising God (as only men were to do), all at the instigation of the guest rabbi that day, Jesus of Nazareth.

The author of Luke doesn't actually say it, but any Jewish reader or anyone familiar with Jewish synagogue practices would have known it. That synagogue leader wasn't just mad about breaking a rule about not doing work

on the Sabbath. That was a convenient law to pull out, because everyone knew it and he would seem to have some ground to stand on in interpreting it this way. But this was NOT about Sabbath at all.

It was about control.

Not just about control in this service in the synagogue.

This was about the control of the entire culture as he knew it.

The synagogue leader was indignant because Jesus had just shown up and broken the caste system of the entire religious culture, a caste system the synagogue leader benefited from at the expense of the women and any others who had been suffering for years without any possibility even to *ask* for relief. Jesus wasn't just performing a miracle in healing the woman; he was taking on the establishment that was allowing her to stay entrapped in her suffering.

In these three archetypes, we can get a better understanding of what Jesus intends for our Christian faith today. If we are honest with ourselves, (and by that, I mean if I am honest with myself), then we need to admit that it's hard not to live out our faith like the synagogue leader. That secretly, we want the rules to follow; we want a faith where the lines are clearly laid out and if we follow them, then we know we're good. Unfortunately, that is not where Jesus wants us to be, and this scripture makes that clear.

And so we hope, that at least our faith looks somewhat like the healed woman, standing straight and lifting her praises to God. We want to focus on our healing; the idea that we come to God broken, but an encounter with God heals us and sets us free. Most of us can claim the praising woman as the one that we identify with the most in the scripture; the one who has a faith that looks like ours.

And the third option to think about is how Jesus in this story can be a model for the life of faith we are to have. Jesus shows us a way to walk in a radical faith. The miracle of this story is in the healing, but the POWER of this story is in the way Jesus challenges the establishment – the way he takes on

the caste system that is keeping this woman from being healed. This is a story about freedom, but there are two points of freedom to consider. The simple lesson is that Jesus frees us from our burdens; from the things that weigh us down and bend us over. But do not miss the more challenging lesson that Jesus is freeing us from the institutions and systems that are keeping us in our brokenness. Jesus frees us from our inner demons; but Jesus also frees us from the establishments that hold us back. Jesus wants us to love and praise God with a freedom that comes from being lifted of the burden of BOTH of these! That is a radical thought I know. This is a moment when he is really turning over the apple cart. He is the beginning of the time when Jesus starts turning the world upside down, making the first, last and the last, first. And I tell you, the religious establishment didn't like it. The end of the scripture says that the crowds were rejoicing, but that his opponents were put to shame.

The biggest challenge in this scripture is a simple question: what is holding you back? What are the burdens that you are carrying that weigh you down like the bent woman? Maybe it is a physical illness that we are struggling with? But could it also be those internal demons that weigh us down – the addictions and the obsessions that seize us. Can we allow that radical Christ to free you from these things?

But what else is holding you back? What are the institutions that we need to be freed from? The external systems that are working on us? It may be stress within the job, an old divorce, or (dare I say it) maybe even the church, that is keeping us weighed down and unable to worship God.

And perhaps the most challenging question is, are there moments when, like the synagogue leader, where WE are the ones doing the “holding back”? Where we are the ones keeping God's praise down? Whether we come this morning with a physical ailment that bends and breaks us; whether we come this morning with the weight of an oppressive and exploitive system on your heart, the message from the radical Christ for you is this: Stand straight, you are freed! GO, and praise God. Amen.