

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.

The Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote that the Bible bears witness to the truth that we all, each of us and individually, are the objects of God's ultimate concern, rather than visa-versa. That is, the scant attention that we pay to God in our lives has little to no reflection on the over generous amount of love that God shares with us.

This story brought to us by Luke presents more than meets the ear. It is not so much about a healing that takes place, but rather it's effects: how God's loving, persistent mercy ripples outward over impediments and obstacles, washing over them, and us, in grace.

This Bible scene is straightforward enough. You can picture it in your mind's eye. A bent over woman attending Synagogue, seated quietly enough minding her own business, catches Jesus' eye. He must

have seen something in her besides her infirmity because he calls her a daughter of Abraham.

Before touching her, he pronounces her healed, unbound from what has ailed her for so long. She is suddenly loosed by what once so long bound her.

Interestingly, the words Jesus uses for her healing, that she is loosed from what had once bound her, are the same words used by Jesus in his speaking with Peter in last week's lesson; that Peter was given power to loose and to bind in regards to the keys of the kingdom.



The next scene is a little tricky for the cameraman. Its not a face to face argument, a debate between the two, but rather a plea to the audience at hand; the gathered congregation who have just witnessed this- a once crippled woman now upright and praising God.

The leader of the synagogue goes first, taking a cue from that old saying, how does it go? ... 'No good deed goes unpunished.'

The leader protests this healing of the woman to the congregation, citing a Sabbath restriction of keeping it a day of Holy rest, acknowledging God's rest after creation. He is offended that Jesus would heal on the Sabbath.

Jesus' understanding of the Sabbath is different. Jesus cites a loophole in the law that allows for the watering of an ox or donkey, and questions the sense of not applying that same standard to a human being. What sense does that make? Is it not right for her to be loosed from her bonds on the Sabbath?

The camera now scans the synagogue's leaders, covered in confusion by Jesus' straightforward argument, unable to sort through the jot and tittles of law. Then the lens moves to final scene we're left with, of people overjoyed and astonished at both Jesus' miracle and his grace-filled defense of it.

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As the camera pulls back and the stage lights go dim, I wonder where this story leaves us on this third Sunday of Lent. This is a season for us to encounter something of our Living Lord in our midst. So in our recognizing our personal encounters with Jesus, we can also find ourselves on a continual journey of tension, too... symbolized by Jesus' arguments with the authorities. We are tugged two ways at once; aware of the goodness of God's mercies, but also living with the limits we've been given.

We are co-inheritors of those who received healing. Like the bent over woman who stood up straight and began praising God, we have good reasons to be very, very thankful.



But we also live in a world where we see plain evidence of how and where healing has not taken place. Life is sometimes very hard, with more violence, disease, hurt and injustice than we are

prepared for. And sometimes we can mix up the love of God and the hardness of the world.

I know someone who once said to me, “I spent the first thirty years of my life thinking God was mad at me for something. Then I saw Jesus.”

The Bible bears witness, most especially in the stories of Jesus, to the truth that we are the objects of God’s ultimate concern, commitment and love. All too easily things come in between our recognizing God’s goodness and the way we live our lives.

A friend of mine tells a story that is a good example of this. She had been part of a national Presbyterian gathering, a General Assembly Committee on Ecumenical Relations, in Louisville, KY, for two days, discussing BIG, IMPORTANT things; how churches and denominations can partner as faithful, engaged Christians. It was good work; planning, sharing, dreaming, hoping, praying... although she wouldn’t have said that she felt the intimate touch of God on her shoulder during the hours of all the long, and very drawn out

conversations.

At the conclusion of the gathering, they were taken to the Louisville airport to catch a flight back to Newark, headed back home.

Now, the Louisville airport is apparently pretty small; very clean and tidy, a breath of fresh air, really, kind of homey. As she approached the TSA security line though, she saw a tangle of people ahead all bunched together, and she felt some impatience rise in her, an urgency to get through the line; she didn't want to miss her flight.

The crowd in front of her was milling around, unorganized, random- and slightly maddening to her as an anxious, punctual traveler.

But as she drew closer, she saw that the gathered mob wasn't made up of travelers at all. Kids were running around the fringes of the group with colorful balloons, laughing.

The word "Congratulations!" was lifted up on a banner held high. Cameras flashed like paparazzi.

In the middle of the happy crowd she noticed a young woman holding no camera and no balloon. What she held was a baby, an 8 or 9 month-old child snuggled close and dear. The young woman was teary eyed and so was her husband at her side.

My friend's educated guess (which turned out to be true) was that this was the return of a newly adopted child from a faraway place, with a gathered gaggle of friends and family to celebrate and welcome them home. It was a happy time; and my friend said that all she felt was embarrassment at the judgment she felt at first glance.

When she realized what was really going on, she sensed the real reason for celebration, and she herself wanted to be part of it, too.

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We have come together on this Sabbath Day, drawn somehow by God's goodness... and God meets us here, freeing us, at least momentarily, of that which binds us and holds us back. In this Sabbath time together, when we intentionally name and claim God's love for us- we also recognize ways in which the gifts we have been given are not being used as fully as they could be... That God's Spirit could help unbind us from that which keeps us from living more fully as Jesus would have us live.... to become more fully the people God has made us to be...



So I invite you to take a few minutes to consider, in writing, if you like, honestly, what this might mean for you...

Perhaps it is how you are bound, or maybe how you see, or would like to see God leading you to new steps in life, guiding in the way and manner of Jesus. Where do you see God leading you, freeing you- opening you anew in your journey with Jesus in life?

What are you in a position to do, already- that you haven't yet done, but want to? After hearing Jesus' words to you, how will you stand anew?

Amen.