

18 Long Years...

Last week, Jesus said he was coming not to bring peace, but to divide us 3-2 or 2-3. And it was the way in which Jesus divides that eliminates the 4-1 or 1-4 ratio—which provides us a sense of false peace which is over/against someone else. But within the 3-2 or 2-3 ratio we are left to discern what side are we going to stand on. So Luke's gospel is helpful in that he gives us some stories to help us figure it out. And here is one such story. Listen for God's Spirit.

Luke 13: 10-17

¹⁰Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹And 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. ¹²When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." ¹³When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. ¹⁴But 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." ¹⁵But 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 to water? ¹⁶And 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?" ¹⁷When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

18 years. 18 long years. 18 years is a long time. It's the length of a generation. Think back to what was happening for you eighteen years ago. Some of you weren't born yet! A lot can change over eighteen years. And it is a long time for someone to suffer.

So begin by bringing to mind someone you know who has had a rough go of things for several years. With each passing year it's as if life puts another brick in their backpack. And after a while the compounding weight begins to take its toll on the spirit. After three challenging years, we have all felt the weight of Covid on our spirits. As Covid continues more and more people who are health compromised feel the weight of a world which seems to be moving ahead without them. Three years can be a long time as well. As school is about to begin some of our teachers will have students who haven't ever had a stable home—not for 18 years. Or, if we think eighteen years has been a long time, just think about the 400 plus years of racism our African American friends have endured. From slavery to Jim Crow, to mass incarceration, to gerrymandering and school boards wanting to cancel the truth of their history. We know people who have carried the sins of society on their backs for a long, long time. So perhaps we can think of a friend or family member or an acquaintance who has had a rough go of things for a while.

So there's this woman at church on the sabbath. She has had a crippling spirit which bent her over for eighteen years. She looked at the ground as she walked. She had to contort herself in order to look someone in the eyes. We don't know exactly what her condition was, but she was overcome by something so big, perhaps even so unfair, it crippled her body as well as her spirit. And notice: she doesn't cry out for help. She doesn't make a sound. She understands the house rules.

Except, in a society where disabled people are invisible, Jesus sees her. What does it feel like to be seen? It feels like someone understands what we are going through. When someone notices we need help with the door or carrying something, we feel seen, right? Jesus sees her. He calls her over. He releases her from the crippling spirit which has overwhelmed her body for eighteen long years. And what does she do after he releases her burdens? She cries out for joy! She's not silent anymore! She's been seen. She's been delivered! She stands up straight and there is a new pep to her step!

Except, there are some stodgy leaders in the room who aren't celebrating. Now who would have a problem with being healed and set free? Apparently, only someone who is still attached to an oppressive system. We can hear him finger wagging now: "Now Jesus, there is no healing on the sabbath!" And Jesus responds, "You phony! We unbind animals on the sabbath every week to give them what they need, why not unbind this daughter of Abraham to give her what she needs after eighteen long years!"

Now it's here we are introduced into a curious thing: how does Jesus know how many years she's been bound? You see, Luke has slipped us a big clue in this story. Luke tells us twice that the woman has been crippled for eighteen years. Numbers are big clues in the bible. And it is here we are given a lens through which to interpret what side of the dividing line we stand on. And wouldn't you know there is only one other place where something has occurred to the children of Abraham for eighteen years. It's snuggled into the third chapter of Judges. You know that book in the bible where Israel teeter-totters between having peace and messing it all up by doing "what is evil in the sight of the Lord." Here they have messed things up, and so Israel has been handed over to the king of Moab—a big fat king named Eglon. He's a Jabba the Hut character whose cruelty oppresses Israel for eighteen long years. But then God raises up a deliverer named Ehud. Ehud is a left-handed person, who, because he is left-handed can sneak his sword into King Eglon's chambers (most security only patted down the left thigh where a right hander keeps the sword. Ehud says, "I have a word from the Lord for you" and then he pokes his sword into the fat king's blubbery belly. Our hero, Ehud, slips away. And he ends up leading the people in an uprising which eventually delivers Israel into an eighty year period of peace—all after eighteen long years of being bent over by oppression. It's truly a fun bar-mitzva story!

Now we can hear Luke's question more clearly: are we going to be someone who gets fat off oppressing others, or are we going to help to free people—like this "Daughter of Abraham"—by poking holes in the systems which cripple people's bodies and spirits? Systems in corporate politics. Systems at school. Systems in the church. It's ironic: the religious leaders, those who were the custodians of God's liberating good news, how easy it is for religion to slip into a system which oppresses and marginalizes those who are meant to be freed by it. "Well, what's it gonna be?" Jesus asks, "Which side do we stand on?"

When we show up to stand with Latino voices at board meetings to get bi-lingual teachers in the classroom, we are seeing the need and helping to poke a hole in a system of white entitlement and supremacy. When we fight for expansive health care, we are seeing the need for our disabled neighbors. When we reach out to let someone who is immune compromised know we are thinking of them, we are “seeing” them and helping to lift the burdens they are carrying on their backs by reminding them they are a child of God and are not alone. Perhaps this week we can all reach out to someone who we know is having a rough go and let them know we are there for them.

It’s the work of the church. To see those who are “bent over” from systems of oppression and to actively stand on their side. So keep poking holes in oppression, Trinity. And keep helping people to stand up straight into the fullness of life that God intends for all of us. Amen.