

*St. John Lutheran Church*

*The Sermon*

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August 21, 2022

Luke 13:10-17

It must have taken some courage for the woman in the gospel lesson for today to come forward when Jesus called her. This is for three reasons. First, it is likely that women in synagogues in Jesus' day had a designated section, that they did not usually come forward in front of everyone. Second, it takes some courage to get up in front of people anyway. And most importantly, it takes some courage to believe that you can be healed, that you can be free.

When you are bent over, the only thing you can see is the ground in front of you. It takes an enormous amount of effort to look up into people's faces, to meet them eye to eye. It takes an enormous amount of energy to turn around and look up at the sky.

Jesus says that this woman has been bound by Satan. Which is to say, her problem is not the will of God in any way. Nor is it her fault. Satan has bound her.

So in what way, do you think, does Satan bind you? Perhaps you suffer from a physical difficulty. We'll talk about that in a little while. Some of us may have mental conditions or emotional pain which bends us over, so that we don't see anything except the ground in front of us, so that it takes an enormous amount of energy to look up into people's faces, to connect with them as people, to trust and be trustworthy, to be connected, to be human with each other. All of us are bent over spiritually. For all of us, it is very hard to look up at the sky, at wonder and mystery and hope and the presence of God, which is always there, like the sky. In fact, it's so hard that we can't. Thanks be to God that God comes down to us, and shows us the depth of God's mystery and hope and wonder, in the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

How does Satan bind you? And how does Jesus call you forward, out of your familiar spaces, out of your expected position? How does Jesus call you to be courageous, to be healed?

The woman does come forward. Jesus touches her with that powerful, trustworthy, good touch. And she stands up straight. This happens for her, right away. For some of us it is the same. We are healed, freed from bondage in one moment. For others of us, it takes much longer. How does Jesus call you to courage?

And immediately, the bent-over woman begins rejoicing and praising God for what God is doing. When we rejoice and praise God for what God is doing in our world, that rejoicing sweeps us up into itself, so that we become a part of God's work in the world, so that we serve God's love for us, every other human being on this planet and for the whole creation. That's what it means to be free.

Now, I need to make sure that you are aware, that God's freedom, God's unbinding, God's healing is going to ruffle some feathers. For example, the leader of the synagogue in the gospel lesson for today is uncomfortable, even angry because somebody has healed on the Sabbath.

This is not some little stupid, silly rule. Resting on the Sabbath day is one of the Ten Commandments, up there with not murdering people. If we don't take a Sabbath, if we don't take time to rest and pray and learn and grow in our understanding of God, then we will become bitter, and arrogant, and everything will begin to taste like dust.

It was important. In Jesus's day, there was a debate about when you could work on the Sabbath. Everyone agreed that if someone's life was threatened, you could do work to save their life, even on the Sabbath day. So, if you were walking by a pond and you saw somebody drowning in that pond, you could take a long branch and hold it out to them, and pull them back to safety. That was a kind of work, but it was okay to do on the Sabbath day because you were saving somebody's life.

However, there was a controversy among the rabbis of the time as to whether it was okay to do work to heal somebody whose life was not in danger. On one side of the debate, the rabbis said, "No, people can wait till tomorrow. This woman has been bent over for eighteen years, she can wait one more day. The Sabbath is important." Other rabbis said, "On the contrary, healing is an important enough thing that it is okay to work on the Sabbath if that works helps somebody to heal."

As you can tell, the leader of the synagogue was taking one side of this debate, and Jesus was taking the other.

And I get it. I kind of sympathize with the leader of the synagogue, because when we feel threatened, when our way of life and our culture and our religion and our values seem to be in danger, we tend to go rigid, become less flexible, we dig in and double down.

In Jesus's day, the Roman Empire occupied ancient Judea. Roman values prevailed. Roman customs were the norm. So, if you wanted to succeed as a merchant, you delivered your goods when the Romans wanted them, even if it was on the Sabbath. If you were a carpenter or a stonemason or a builder, when the Romans wanted you to work and would pay you to work, even if it was on the Sabbath day, and you might take a day off on Saturnalia, or on the Emperor's birthday. It was hard to maintain a Jewish way of life. It was hard to follow Jewish religion.

So, Jewish culture, Jewish values, Jewish religion, Jewish nationhood were under threat. It was perfectly natural for the leader of the synagogue to dig down into the more rigid side of his tradition. We all do that, when we are afraid. We all have a tendency to become harder, more rigid, to be bent over, to see only the ground in front of us. When we fear for our values and our way of life, it becomes very difficult to look up at people, to meet their eyes as one human being to another, especially when they think differently or act differently or believe differently than we do. It becomes hard to look up, to see mystery and wonder and hope, and the presence of God.

So, tell me, how does Satan bind you? And how does Jesus call all of us to courage, to freedom, to be healed?

I want to tell you about someone in our congregation, who is bent over, physically. Her name is Carolyn, and she serves on the worship committee. Many of you know Carolyn. She lines up our readers for us. If you speak to her for any more than ten seconds, you will realize that she has a sharp intellect and a forthright personality. She will tell you what she thinks. She has bright eyes. Some of you know that she used to be a jazz singer here in Louisville. And she used to stand up straight and tall.

Now her back condition has bent her over. She has had many medical challenges, and she could be bitter. But instead, she says that God has helped her make it through. Some years ago, she had cancer. She had to take chemotherapy. She says, she lost all her hair, and the chemotherapy made her feel sick, sick, sick. She says that then, at that time, she came to understand what it means when we say that the Holy Spirit is the comforter. She says, “I never understood it all my life up until that time, but then I understood the Holy Spirit as the comforter, because the Holy Spirit comforted me.”

This is the God we proclaim. This is the God Jesus brings to us, and whom we serve, as a community, as a church. This is the God in whom we rejoice, in our lives, in our votes, in our actions, in our speech: the One who sets us free. Thanks be to God.