Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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August 21, 2022

*“Holy Day”* Luke 12:10-17

The temptation with this passage is to focus exclusively on the synagogue official who scolds Jesus for healing on the Sabbath. We all like to focus on him because he is so clearly in the wrong. He so clearly “misses the point!”

Somehow, he cannot he see how important it is for this woman—this *un*named woman—to be freed from her infirmity. He is so focused on the law—and his authority to administer it—that he has become insensitive to her well-being. He has become so nit-pickingly inflexible about the law that he would prolong her suffering to suit it. He has absolutely no problem sacrificing to the law this woman’s well-being.

He is also wrong when he says, *‘There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.’* [14] He is wrong because he seems to be addressing the woman who is bent over. The suggestion is that it is *she* who initiated Jesus’ attention and action.

She did not. It was Jesus who saw and healed her. It was his initiative.

That is why I would like us to take a closer look at her. I would like us to think about why she did *not* come to Jesus asking to be healed.

Let us put to the side the notion that Jesus did not give her a chance to ask (although it does kind of seem as though he did). Instead, let us consider what her life was like, and what may have prevented her from seeking Jesus’ notice and help.

First, we are told that she is *“bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight.”* [11] The picture this paints is that mostly what she saw of the world was the three or four square feet in front of her. This was all she could see. If there were any other obstacles beyond her limited sight, she would not have been aware of them. This prescribed area in front of her is all she saw, but luckily, Jesus was able to see her, and much farther.

But let us fully consider what this meant for her: she was limited by what she could no longer see. Think of all the things you and I can see or deal with because we are able to walk upright. She could not see any of this. She also could not see Jesus. Again, luckily, he saw her.

Second, she has been seeing the world through this limitation for a significant amount of time. The passage says it has been eighteen years. For eighteen years this woman has spent most of her waking moments staring at the ground. She has been mostly aware of the presence of others by the small clouds of dust they kicked up beside her as they passed or stepped around her.

Still, we are told that this affliction has only taken eighteen years of her life. By that I mean that there appears to have been a time in her life when she was *not* bent over. There was a time when she had been stronger, healthier. There may have been a time when her back was straight—or straighter than it was—and she was able to look into the world the way others did.

There was a time when she was still able to look into the faces of others, and they could see her face, too. This was another thing that she had not had in all those years: that others were able to see her face, and even look into her eyes. Her face been pretty effectively hidden from the world for all of that time.

There is an unfortunate tendency for us to overlook people, or (conversely) to single them out for exclusion when their physical appearance is different. Being as bent over as she was, she did not attract the kind of casual attention we all do simply by being like everyone else. For all intents and purposes, she was invisible to others. She may even have come to be accustomed to being overlooked or hidden from others. She may even have been accustomed to others being hidden from her, too. And so, even on that singular morning in the synagogue she could not, and did not expect to see Jesus. Luckily, he saw her.

There is also another aspect to her infirmity. The passage says that it was *“a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years.”* [11]

Although you and I are used to dealing with illness and infirmity as medical conditions, when reading the Bible, we also have to ask ourselves what such conditions meant on a spiritual level to Jesus and the people he encountered. How did they think of themselves when suffering an infirmity, and how did they think of their suffering?

In the case of this woman: to have been “crippled by a spirit” means that something had assumed power over her body. Something not of God has taken control of her life. And this “something” is so powerful that it dictates her actions; what and who she saw, where and when she went out into the world, and how she responded to others around her.

In affecting her the way it did, and for as long as it did, this spirit has materially changed how she interacted with others, how she thought of herself among others. Indeed, it changed how she thought of herself as a person.

Most of us know what this is like. Even though most of us have remained healthy these past few years (praise God), this pandemic has altered all of the ways in which we were used to living our lives. It has disrupted the routines we used to have. It has curtailed the connections we used to enjoy and has caused us to keep apart from one another.

We are careful to wear our masks—which is a good thing. However, we are also aware of how our masks hide us from one another or at least limit how much of ourselves we are able to show to and share with one another.

That was what life was like for the woman in this passage. We do not know why or how this woman had been bent over for so long. We are told that a “spirit” that harmed had taken hold of her. For eighteen years she had lived with it, and the power of that spirit had taken its toll on her.

As one commentator wrote about the woman’s situation: “after trying to stand up against it for so long, only to fail again and again, you can feel like your only defense is to just embrace it; and worse, to accept it… “This is just how I am now!”  And this is how you begin to identify yourself, in fact you begin to let others identify you based on that spirit… “He’s the fat one; she’s a workaholic; he’s a drunk; she’s a widow; she’s been abused, he’s got a bad marriage, she’s neurotic, he is self-centered…” And those labels stick... My God do they stick…

“And once we internalize our labels, we quickly learn to become ashamed of them.  That’s common in our, “only the strong survive” “take care of yourself” “figure it out” society… But a life lived in shame is not easy to navigate.   So we spend our lives on the margins, slipping in late and making our way to the back corner of the room; hunched over because we can’t stand to look anyone in the eye… can’t stand to look ourselves in the eye anymore.

“*This* is the bent over woman.  She is everyone who has ever struggled to rise above the pain of oppression and self-worth and judgment from others… she is everyone who has struggled with illness, addictions, loss of value, loss of spouse, or self-esteem or innocence… she is anyone who has lived in a situation that is intolerable… anyone who has been told "You Can't" and believed it.... anyone and everyone who has lost hope…”

In the passage we heard, on this particular morning, something has drawn her to the synagogue. It is a chore to make her way from her home to this crowded place. Crowded places are always a problem. With her sight as limited as it is, there is always the danger of getting in the way of others, always the risk of being shoved aside by someone in a hurry. However, she goes. The problem is: even when she gets there, she still cannot see Jesus.

Luckily, he sees her.

Not only does he see her, he knows what needs to be done for her and he does not hesitate. He goes to her. He breaks several social and religious customs—like touching someone who is ill, and speaking to a woman unconnected to your family—but Jesus goes to her anyway, and he reaches out to her.

He does more than see her. He does more than lay his hands on her. He reminds her—and everyone else in the synagogue—of who she is. She is, and always has been, a daughter of Abraham, [16] and because no infirmity, and no spirit in the universe can take that away from her, neither will she be denied her right to be seen, recognized, relieved of her suffering, and welcomed.

This is our good news: that with God we are all seen and welcomed as sons and daughters. This is also part of our mission in the world: we do not shame people or push them to the side because of who they are or for what they struggle with. Rather, we extend the hand of fellowship and help. We are to remember Jesus and his complete dedication to seeing and serving. Indeed, he did more than “see.” He sought out those in need and he ignored every barrier that stood between him and those in need.

Are we seeking as faithfully and as diligently those “bent over” women and men in our time and place?

Yes, we are already doing quite a bit in the community and it is tempting to step back and think that we have done enough. However, I do believe it is important for us to challenge ourselves. It is important to reach out further than we have. It is in this striving that we discover new things—perhaps new strengths, perhaps—about ourselves and each other.

Indeed, the most important thing we can and should learn—over and over again—is that do not have to strive and reach out by ourselves. We can form partnerships. We can support others who are doing the work we care about. The important thing is to find our part in the missions and ministries that are moving forward…and move along with them!

Most importantly, what we need to remember is that Jesus sees us, and because of that neither you nor I nor anyone need live bent over to anything or anyone in any way, because the one who knows the truth about you sees all of it and still calls you daughter! The one who loves you and lifts you to new life calls you son!

Let our prayer today be that we—each of us and all of us together—that will listen for the Spirit of love as it calls to us. Let our prayer be that we will listen and allow our lives to be strengthened and made strong so that we may proclaim the love and mercy of God. May this ne so. Amen.