

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 08/21/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, August 21st

Luke 13:10-17

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Jesus confronts legalism and tradition

In the last recorded time that Jesus is teaching in a synagogue, the idolatry of legalism and tradition and the hypocrisy of the religious leaders are exposed to the delight of the people. At the same time, the compassion of Jesus is revealed. This narrative causes us to reflect on our own understanding of church and worship in our time.

Luke 13:10-17

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your disability." ¹³ And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God.

We don't know when or where this event occurred other than it was in a synagogue on a Sabbath. Notice how Jesus was teaching in the synagogue (Luke 4:15). Jesus sees a long-standing disabled woman, if physical, perhaps it was some form of ankylosing spondylitis. Jesus calls the woman to Him. The fact that she had to come to Jesus, despite her disability may indicate the nature of call and response. We can imagine her slowly making her way to the front of the assembly. Jesus healed her. Whether the disability was the result of a physical ailment, or a spiritual condition is not important. The woman was in no doubt of who to credit with her cure.

¹⁴ But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, "There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day." ¹⁵ Then the Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" ¹⁷ As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.

Despite witnessing a miracle in front of him, we read how the ruler of the synagogue was indignant because the healing occurred on the Sabbath. The ruler did not criticize Jesus directly but addressed the people. In his mind, he is making a reasoned point: "What's the matter with you people? Come any other day of the week to be healed but no work must be done on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:9; 31:14,15)!" If Jesus was willing to wait another

day, there would have been no problem. After all, the woman had been in this condition for 18 years. What difference does one more day make? A pragmatic Jesus, a Jesus willing to get along with the authorities would have come back the next day or waited until sundown. Yet for Jesus, pragmatism would not trump his compassion and his sense of mission.

Jesus points out the hypocrisy of the ruler of the synagogue and anyone who agrees with him (the plural, "hypocrites," is used). It is important to recognize that Jesus was not violating the original Old Testament commandment. Later Jewish traditions added many more commandments and prohibitions. Even with such additions, there was a generally accepted practice of caring for animals on the Sabbath. If the animals could be untied on the Sabbath, shouldn't a daughter of Abraham (a reference to the woman's membership of the covenant community), of much greater worth than an animal, be loosened from her bondage on the Sabbath day too? The same Greek word is rendered "*untie*" and "*loosed*." We read in the text how Jesus' response puts all his adversaries to shame and how all the people rejoiced.

Reflections

This event is an example of Jesus fulfilling what He announced at the start of His ministry when He read from Isaiah 58 and 61: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor*" (Luke 4:18,19).

It is tempting to make this text a simple good guy-bad guy story and assign the ruler of the synagogue the role of villain. This would be too simplistic. The woman's presence in the synagogue suggests she was being looked after and cared for by the community. The first century synagogue (Greek: "assembly") served a variety of communal needs such as for schools, for communal meals, as hostels, as courts, as a place to collect and distribute charity, as a place for political meetings and some aspects of worship, although this would not fully develop until after the destruction of the temple. In many ways, the synagogue of Jesus' day played a vital role for the community in a similar way the local church has done in the West through to the mid-twentieth century. When Jesus challenged the traditions associated with the Sabbath, He challenged the core establishment of the synagogue and the status quo of Jewish society.

As the nature of the established church in the West is radically changing, it is perhaps a useful exercise to view such change through the lens of this Gospel pericope. What traditions or habitual ways of thinking about doing church might be getting in the way of being the church? Things that may have served the "*Ekklesia*" well in the past may be a distraction in the present. One example is that as many congregations are becoming older and smaller, the burden of a large building can consume a greater percentage of resources and volunteer hours. The focus can easily become the building and not the ministry the building supported. Right now, the unused square footage of real estate taken up by local church buildings that are mostly vacant except for a few hours on a Sunday morning is staggering. Many of these buildings are in communities where such real estate can solve many varied needs for the immediate community and advance the Gospel in new ways. Many of our churches today were built at a time and place they were needed and successfully served their purpose for generations. While retaining a church building may make sense in our traditional worldview of the church, we are reminded that Jesus, the Head of the Church, did not allow human traditions to get in the way of His purpose and ministry.