

“May we bless the Lord, and
never forget
God forgives and heals!” Amen!

Jesus was at it again.

Remember, last week?

His proclamation of division.

His message of coming to overturn
the evil power structures of the world,
calling people to follow Him,

Knowing how what he did would
cause division among families.

The reality of Jesus’ purpose is, and was,
a hard pill to swallow for followers,
but we are reminded
to not be surprised by the Christ reality,

nor be surprised at
the human reaction,
to this new life.

All we need to do is look at what change does.

Change, causes anxiety, worry, change feels unstable.

Jesus and change can step on toes
and cause division.

The “we have always done it this way” people
(which we need to admit is all of us)
bristle at change.

We avoid it as much as possible
because change will cause division. (Pause)

Beloved, we are coming up on
the three year anniversary of a
very profound change forced upon us.

We didn't know what it was in
November/December of 2019, but Covid
was beginning to put the world into a tailspin.

And by March/April of 2020, people
couldn't do the things the way
they've always done them and
people got angry, anxious, scared.

Divisions grew deep,
when change needed to happen.

Thoughtful leaders expressed
directions to populations on taking
precautions while they tried
to figure things out.

People chose sides and some even threw out
the advice from experts so that they
could avoid making a change.

For me, one of the hardest parts of
this divisive time was to see and hear people
make proclamations that they were
going to go to church, no matter what.

And said things like, “I’m not wearing a mask,
no matter what.”

And, then conclude, that if any person
who advises against going to church and
wearing a mask, must have a weak faith or
be some sort of coward.

It was as if they believed Covid was a
cosmic test by the devil
to keep people from going to church and if
a person chose to stay home or
wear a mask then they were
somehow lesser... weaker...
faithless. (Pause)

The Lord be with you...

As we find in our gospel, pandemic may
be a cosmic test but it was one that
demands of us a compassionate responses,
not judgments.

That day in the synagogue, Jesus healed
a woman crippled with a spirit for 18 years.

She was bent over... unable to stand up straight.

The physical disability or spirit made her
unable to look a person in the eye.

It prevented her from experiencing
a daily life of doing things that a
physically able person could do.

Her presence caused a division when
people around her probably blamed and judged
her for her condition.

We, too, know how easy it can be
to cast judgment so as to not offer assistance
if the woman was getting
what she deserved, right?

I wonder if she'd been told
that it was her fault so often
that she was even beginning
to believe it herself?

Causing her to be more bent over...

And then I wonder, was that leader in
the synagogue like the religious fanatics
of our day?

The ones who kept encouraging large
group worship and dismissed
health expert's advice.

The ones who quote the sacred
writings of their faith to make coming to God
a narrow path.

Those who create division in these ways
bring about self benefits for themselves
and endanger people's health.

It is not only a problem for religions, you know.

We can hardly NOT notice these
same selfish blinders in our political leadership.

No matter which animal or color of

the political establishment you & I support.

As the divide grows deeper, each extreme
will express to those who listen
that the path is narrow;

So narrow that you must stare at the path
and never look up from it.

These things are said in
order for them to gain more advantage/privilege.

Not all political leaders are like this, though.

Sibling in Christ, you know me,
I usually forgo naming names because
it can cause the listener to become
focused on wrong things and
miss hearing the gospel.

But, on this occasion, I'll break my own rule. :-)

The political leader's name is Liz Cheney.

You probably know that Senator Cheney
lost her election in the primary this past week.

The reason she lost the primary was
because she refused to accept

the fanatic's command that to belong,
you must follow a narrow path
and not look up to see what it is
doing to other people.

But see, by not accepting
the fanatic's demand to stay on the narrow path,

she is able to see the broader picture of
where the narrow path was taking her.

She retains her integrity and is
therefore set free.

There are others like Liz Cheney
that hold their beliefs for the
best practices of leadership and

They strive for processes that they believe
will make government work the best;

Ones who speak words carefully and
will not forfeit their integrity just to win.

There are others, but it looks to be
that their numbers are shrinking. (Pause)

So the division will occur, it must because silence is not an
option.

Make voting a priority.

Like Jesus said, “the fire he kindles
will bring about a need for people to change.”

I’m paraphrasing His words but that’s because
I don’t want to miss seeing God’s next miracle.

The leader of the synagogue missed it.

He was on a narrow path and we need to know
that if he was on the narrow path
then so was his worship community.

Remember the narrow path of religious fanatics
is that there is only one way to God.

Head down... and listening to
voices that counter Jesus’. (Pause)

Today we affirm that when we
do this kind of life walk
we will miss seeing the miracle.

The leader, and parts of that community,
saw a person suffering and they said,
“Come back tomorrow. We’ll help you, then.”

They missed someone being brought
to liberation and given a new life.

Not only this,
they were angry when
Jesus gave both. (Pause)

Now, I'll be the first to tell you,
I have felt the desire to postpone
mercy and assistance and
I have succumbed to it, too.

I have extended the suffering of others,
but that doesn't mean I cannot change,
and that goes for you as well.

St. Stephen, this is the day for change;
for walking broad paths;
for being generous because
Jesus was generous and
to tell people all about
the broad path of God's love.

Opponents of the Jesus way,
they'll be put to shame, we can't change that,
but they cannot force us
to be narrow minded and
they will not cause us
to miss the miracles

that God provides.

Liberation comes even when we lose...

You heard it correctly though it
sounds counter-intuitive,

Liberation comes even when we lose.

Jesus does what he does to remind us that
what we are doing, right here, right now, is
practicing Shabbat.

The holy activity of stopping and being
brought to delight by
the presence of God.

Shabbat means “Stop.”

A “holy stop” for us to look up and see
the God of creation, Spirit of change,
and the Christ of liberation
is setting captives free.

A God who is not surrounded by
narrow gates or selfish human structures
that benefit only a few. (Pause)

This God calls humanity to forgive themselves,
cease blaming others, to speak God’s love

through word and action,

to give food away, and help the afflicted.

It's a hard, hard, hard, call God puts on us,
but "Hey! No one said change was easy!" :-)

So in grace we come and
by grace we go and we keep looking up.

By doing what we do and going where we go,
we might cause shame to someone
who thinks they're doing right by following the law,
but laws can be misinterpreted;
not every law is just or ethical.

Why shouldn't this woman be healed on the Sabbath?

Why shouldn't we?

May these words bring you liberation and truth
to walk through and on the broad path with God.

AMEN!