

Apparently, things did not go too badly last time I appeared here for the service. I've been asked back. (Well, there was that time when I was supposed to be here, but weather got in the way, so I suppose that doesn't count.)

It's a special day for me today, marking my wife, Nancy, and my 51st Wedding Anniversary. So nice to celebrate with you. Afterwards, we have to rush off to Vermont for a family celebration.

Our 50th Anniversary passed quite quietly, but it hasn't always been so. We celebrated our 40th Anniversary in Thunder Bay. A renewal of vows and big party was planned for the church. Before hand, however, we had invited a friend and Anishinaabe Elder to come to the house – the Rectory – for a smudging ceremony – an Indigenous practice of prayer and cleansing, similar in some ways to the Christian history of using incense. She arrived in ceremonial regalia and said she would burn just a little sage because we were indoors. However, her idea of a 'little sage' was somewhat understated.

As the smoke began to fill the house, our fire alarms went into loud alert. They were not just your ordinary Costco alarms, however, but wired directly to the Fire Department. Despite our calls to them to tell them what happened, they arrived with lights and sirens to 'check it out'.

People never let us forget the scene and accused us using it as a way to get the fire department to show up at the Anniversary festivities. It certainly got unintended attention.

In the Gospel reading for today, there is a woman suffering from a long-term affliction – 18 years of being unable to stand, presumably in pain. (I know you've been looking at stories of women in the Bible – Mary of Magdala and Mary the Mother of Jesus – but this is an unnamed woman whom Jesus encounters.)

In compassion, Jesus calls her over to himself. She didn't ask to see him or have him notice her. It seems she was just part of the synagogue crowd, but Jesus noticed her. She got some unintended attention. The story is pretty straight forward: having called her over, Jesus speaks words of healing and lays his hands on her. She's healed.

That should have been the end of the story, but it seems that in doing what he did Jesus himself got some unintended attention. From the story as we have it, it appears he was acting out of compassion. Here is a suffering person whom he has the ability to help. He already had a reputation by this time as a caring healer, so there's no hint that he was deliberately making a statement – an example – that he wasn't deliberately provoking the

good people of the synagogue. The power of love and compassion just led him to do what he could do for a suffering human being.

But, that's not how the religious leader saw it. Instead of rejoicing that this poor person was set free of pain and affliction – instead of joining her in her praise of God for this new freedom – he tried to work the crowd up against Jesus.

I suppose in some way – from a certain perspective – he had a sort of case. There were regulations that developed around the commandment to honour the Sabbath. There were historical reasons for these regulations – sometimes called 'fencing the law'. They were intended to make clear how one could keep the law and not accidentally step over the line. They really had a good intention.

However, like many good things, they could go sour and become toxic. The more layers of laws and regulations you build the 'fence' from, the more complicated it gets.

Are you familiar with a book called *A Year of living Biblically*? A young Jewish man who has not been very faithful, decides that for one year he is going to live by the Law. However, there isn't just the Ten Big Ones of Torah that he has to pay attention to. There are all these layers and layers of hundreds of laws surrounding – fencing – the big ones. So after a while, he decided that this is just too hard, so he's going to focus on fewer laws. Even that proves too hard, so he decided on keeping one per week. It goes on, but eventually he finds it's just too difficult and gives up.

In another place in the Gospels, Jesus says: 'Come to me, all you who are weighed down and burdened, and I will give you rest; my way is easy and my burden is light.' It seems he was saying that Torah, which isn't really what we in our cultures have come to regard as 'law' per se – Torah means more a way of living' – saying that Torah is meant to give life and freedom, not crush it out.

That's really what he's arguing for here with this synagogue leader. He's trying to get the guy to see that the Torah and the Sabbath isn't meant to hold people down – Sabbath is meant to give rest and freedom to God's people. It's meant to give life, not squelch life.

The honouring of the Sabbath came, according to the biblical accounts, out of God's coming to dwell with God's people in the original temple setting, which was creation itself. In the Genesis account God is found dwelling with the people. Sabbath has more to do with paying attention to God's presence than it does to labour regulations.

So Jesus says to this leader – and presumably to those gathered there – that if God is present, this woman – 'a daughter of Abraham who Satan bound for eighteen long years' – should be healed by God's presence and set free. That's more to the heart of the Sabbath

that all the surrounding regulations. Sometimes God breaks through the religious fence and does something unexpected.

Sometimes God breaks through our religious fences. Sometimes God breaks through my religious fences. And we all have them, no matter how enlightened we imagine ourselves to be; we all have our own religious bubble. This is what we're used to. This is what we've been taught, or what we've picked up along the way. All of us.

Episcopalians, of course, have a certain reputation for being God's 'frozen people' – the 'chosen frozen' – where if we do something once, it's an innovation. Do it twice, it's tradition. Do it a third time and it's the way we've always done it.

We all have our religious comfort zones – our ways of thinking, believing and doing things that feel familiar and safe. God, however, doesn't seem – in my experience, God doesn't seem to be restricted to my religious comfort zone, however. Instead, God seems to be quite interested in popping the bubble.

It can be quite traumatic sometimes when that bubble gets popped. It can feel scary because it's new. It's uncomfortable. Lots of times I have scrambled to put the bubble back together – like the people of the Exodus did when things got difficult and God was leading them through hard times, and they just wanted to go back to Egypt.

But we can't put the bubble back together once it's burst. We learn to live in a new reality – a new sort of freedom.

For a while. Then we realise that we have slowly, without really noticing it, made this new reality into a new bubble – a new comfort zone.

Eventually, something comes along to challenge that comfort zone and prick the new bubble. This guy that some of you might know a bit, the Rev'd Paul Nesbit, was quoted earlier this month saying: 'We are called to move into areas where we may not have yet ventured.'

That's the problem, you see, with a faith that is engaged with the living God. The living God is always calling us onward. An often repeated phrase in the biblical writing is the God is doing a new thing. It wasn't just that God did a new thing. A living God goes on doing new things, and if we are the people of a living God, we're inescapably part of whatever new things God is doing. We really are being 'called to move into areas [of life and experience and ministry] where we may not have yet venture.'

For so long and for so many people, 'religion' and 'church' and 'the spiritual life' have been about maintaining the bubbles and controlling (if not preventing) 'the new thing'. That's not, however, what you and I are called to do.

I'm not, of course, talking about running after every wild and crazy religious idea that comes along, yet neither is it about fearing. Fear can keep us confined to religious stagnation – a situation which might feel familiar and comfortable to some extent, but which is ultimately stagnant and unsatisfying.

When God bursts our comfort zone bubble and calls us to move into areas we've not yet ventured, we aren't called to go it alone. We have one another to think, pray and discern together. We have the gift of the Spirit given to lead us into truth and into the new thing (or things) we are called to be part of, so that we – like this unnamed woman in the Gospel story – can walk in a new freedom, upright and praising the living God.