

*“Crippled Religion”*

Scripture: Luke 13:10-17

Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day.” But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day? When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing. THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

The woman crippled with a spirit for eighteen years and unable to stand up straight does not ask for healing. Instead, Jesus calls on her and sets her free from her ailment by laying hands on her. Her response is to stand up straight and begin praising God. It is striking that she does not ask for healing, and no one petitions Jesus on her behalf. Over the years, she has become accustomed, if not resigned, to her long and serious illness, which is attributed to Satan. For eighteen years this unnamed woman must strain to see the sun, the sky, and the stars. For eighteen years she has become accustomed to looking down or just slightly ahead but never upward without difficulty. For eighteen years her world has been one of turning from side to side to see what those standing upright can see with just a glance. She is used to this, and no one questions her fate. Instead, the leader of the synagogue gets offended that Jesus would heal on the Sabbath.

If we have read the first twelve chapters of Luke and seen Jesus in various contexts healing on the Sabbath and reformulating Sabbath Law, the events of this selection have a familiar feel. Having already declared himself “Lord of the Sabbath” (6:5) and determined that healing on this sacred day is “to do good” (6:9), we should not be surprised by his actions or his instructions here. Again, Jesus finds himself in what appears to his audience to be a quandary. While he is teaching in an unnamed synagogue on the Sabbath, there appears before him an unnamed woman “who has had a spirit of weakness” for eighteen years. Seeing her, he has a decision to make. Will he heal her and violate the oral law pertaining to Sabbath, or will he attend to the Sabbath restrictions and withhold the blessings that she needs? Given his understanding of his mission, his choice seems obvious; although she never asks, Jesus must heal her. Jesus makes it clear that it is not God’s will that any human being should suffer one moment longer than is absolutely necessary.

Luke describes the healing miracle in two parts. Initially Jesus makes a pronouncement in 13:12 that she has been “released” or “set free”, from the weakness that has crippled her. Yet the healing is not manifested until Jesus lays his hands on her in verse 13.

This seemingly unnecessary second step distinguishes this miracle from the previous Sabbath healing narratives in 6:6-11, where the man with a withered hand is healed as Jesus commands him to extend his hand, or the narrative in 4:31-37, where the spirit of an unclean demon is cast out as Jesus gives the command. Today’s story is perhaps more similar to the account in 14:1-6, where Jesus heals a man with dropsy by “taking hold of him” (14:4), though the touching here may serve a different purpose. In the present instance Jesus’ two-part healing allows him to touch a woman who is unclean, and thereby restore her socially as well as physically. Consider the various instances in Luke’s gospel where Jesus violates Jewish custom and touches unclean people: he touches a leper (5:13), the widow of Nain’s dead son (7:14), he is touched by a woman with a dozen year hemorrhage (8:43-48).

Touching that would have conveyed uncleanness, although unnecessary in light of Jesus' ability to heal by only command, is a frequent occurrence in this gospel.

Touching says symbolically that Jesus does not care for his own sake that those he heals are viewed as unclean, and that he will not allow the threat of the conveyance of uncleanness to keep him from redeeming the wounded and thus marginalized. In each of these instances, his touch represents fellowship for those whose ailments may have denied them human contact; Jesus' touch is their initial welcome back to the community.

The Jesus seen here is also in a familiar position of opposition to the Jewish religious authorities. As with the "scribes and the Pharisees" in 6:7 and the "lawyers and Pharisees" in 14:3, there are present in these healing accounts frequently opponents who are lying in wait to "find an accusation against him" (6:7) or who are silently disturbed by his behavior (14:4). In this selection, the synagogue leader, described as "indignant", actually argues against healing on the Sabbath (13:14).

These figures represent the status quo that Jesus' healings would disrupt; they are the guardians at the gate of an oral tradition that undergirds their social structure. For them, "doing good is not the point, for Jesus' good deeds undermine their social order.

The desire to control Sabbath observance is critical for maintaining another social order as well. The slavocracy of the American South was in part maintained by the restriction of "Doing Good" on the Sabbath. While enslaved Africans desired to worship God and to educate themselves, literally to "Do Good", they were prevented because their improvement represented a threat to the social system that circumscribed their lives. Although the plantation setting isn't a direct parallel to the situation Jesus faces, similar issues of power, control, and order are present in both cases. The control of Sabbath practice in both instances represents a convenient way of maintaining an oppressive system whereby some people are forced to endure perpetual suffering by others who are more concerned with sustaining a system that benefits them than alleviating the burdens of those it cripples.

Jesus' actions challenge that system. Employing a pattern of reasoning familiar from rabbinic Judaism, Jesus argues, if it is permitted to loose an ox or donkey on the Sabbath, then why is it not permissible to loose a "daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years"?

This is the last time we ever hear of Jesus being in a synagogue. It is clear by this time the authorities were watching his every action and waiting to pounce upon him whenever they got the chance. Jesus healed a woman who for eighteen years had not been able to straighten her bent body; and then the president of the synagogue intervened. The president of the synagogue were people who loved the system more than people. He had not even the courage to speak directly to Jesus. He addressed his protest to the waiting people, although it was meant for Jesus. Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, technically healing was work; and therefore, he had broken the Sabbath. But he answered his opponents out of their own law. The Rabbis abhorred cruelty to animals and, even on the Sabbath, it was perfectly legal to loose animals from their stall and water them.

Jesus demanded, "If you can loose an animal from a stall and water it on the Sabbath, surely it is right in the sight of God to loose this poor woman from her infirmity.

In Christianity the individual comes before the system. It is true to say that without Christianity there can be no such thing as democracy, because Christianity alone guarantees and defends the value of the ordinary, individual man or woman. If ever Christian principles are banished from political and economic life there is nothing left to keep at bay the totalitarian state where individuals are lost in the system, and exist, not for their own sake, but only for the sake of that system.

Strangely enough, this worship of systems commonly invades the Church. There are many church people – it would be a mistake to call them Christian people – who are more concerned with the method of church government than they are with the worship of God and the service of others. In the world and in the Church we are constantly in peril of loving systems more than we love God and more than we love one another.

PRAYER:

Go out into the world in peace; have courage; hold on to what is good; return no one evil for evil; support the weak; help the suffering; honor all people; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit. AMEN

**BENEDICTION:**

Again, for Jesus the care of human beings is itself a religious virtue that takes precedence over rite, rituals, and the social systems they endure. Jesus' words here are a reminder that the care for God's people in need is at the heart of our faith.