

Sermon for Sept. 1, 2019
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Ps. 71: 1-8; 17-18; Luke 13: 10-17
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On the Sabbath

The Holy Spirit works in mysterious ways, often in ways that are inconvenient. The gospel lesson this morning from Luke, and found only in Luke, was designated for last Sunday. In fact, I had written the worship material and chosen the hymns for last Sunday around this gospel. But then, in a meeting last week with the new Prayer Team members, the Spirit hit me over the head and said, “Preach the story of the bent over woman next Sunday, when you invite the congregation into a new way of praying for healing.” So, that’s what happened, and I think the Spirit probably made the right choice.

Imagine. Eighteen years of being besieged by a “crippling spirit.” Eighteen years of being unable to stand up straight, not to be able to make eye contact with another human being, to be in such discomfort. Eighteen years of people ignoring you. Eighteen years of being considered “less than.” Eighteen years of begging. The story of the bent over woman is a heartbreaking one. And, a courageous one.

I’ve found in my years as a pastor that people find *asking for prayer* almost as difficult as praying aloud in public. Some folks are just more private. They keep their needs close to their hearts. Others don’t want to “impose” by asking for prayer. And still others use the oft-quoted statement, “My problems really aren’t that big when I consider what other people are going through.” It takes some courage to ask for prayer because asking for prayer, no matter what the need, makes us vulnerable. We admit that we really can’t handle whatever is “bending us over” or weighing us down, when we’d prefer to be seen as self-reliant. We worry what others might think of us if they knew exactly what was going on in our lives. We don’t want anyone to know that maybe, just maybe, we aren’t whole, we aren’t perfect, we don’t have it all together, and we need their prayers. Or maybe our biggest fear is that if we ask for prayer, our prayer won’t be answered the way we want it to be.

If any of this is true for us, then we need to take a closer look at this gospel woman with a crippled spirit and bent over posture. Maybe we need to ask, “What kind of courage does it take to step forward for prayer before a crowd?” which is exactly what she does. We can suppose this woman has been attending worship for those eighteen years, where people have simply quit noticing her. She would know the rules about the Sabbath; she would understand that as a woman, she should be seen (if at all) and not heard (at all). She would have suspected what the Pharisees’ reaction would be if she answered Jesus’ invitation to walk over to him, in public, on a Sabbath. *But she did it.* And then, on top of

every other rule that could be broken, she, a woman, prayed out loud in thanksgiving. In the synagogue.

Asking for prayer may be scary or uncomfortable, but when Jesus calls her forward, nowhere in this story do we see this unnamed woman shy away or sink into the crowd because she is afraid of being vulnerable or having her neediness known. Nowhere do we hear this woman say *she* is not worthy of being healed, that other people's problems are bigger than hers. No, she hears Jesus call her over and she goes. She moves toward Jesus with no expectations but with utter dependence on what he *can* do, not even knowing for sure what he *will* do. She is a model for us. So often, Christ is willing and ready to meet us in a place of healing, but we are reticent, held back by fear or uncertainty or embarrassment.

Then there is Jesus, who also steps out in courage. We are told he is teaching in the synagogue, which is acceptable, but to do more than that on the Sabbath, to notice and reach out to another and to touch someone (especially a woman!) is forbidden because it is outside the boundaries of what is expected, what is controlled. It just isn't done. Pastors face that same challenge every Sunday. What if we do something unexpected? What if we wander away from the pulpit? What if we raise our hands in praise? What if we ask a question and want a response? What if we do something that we haven't specifically asked permission for but that the Holy Spirit prompts us to do? What will the elders think? What will the congregation do?

Jesus didn't care what others thought. Jesus only cared about what God wanted him to do. Jesus saw a person in need, and Jesus acted on it. Jesus healed in all sorts of ways—by speaking to a person, by laying hands on a person, by touching the part of the body that was ill, by making spittle and smearing it on someone's eyes, by sticking his fingers in someone's ears, on the Sabbath and on every other day when there was a need. Manmade rules do not matter in the realm of Jesus Christ, but it took courage for him to act—and we know where that led—and it took courage to seek him in the midst of those who disapproved, or were shocked, or were uncomfortable.

When the Pharisees speak out because their power is being usurped and they are losing their control, they want to put the woman and Jesus in their place, and they sure don't want anymore miraculous healings happening at that moment. Not on the Sabbath. Not on God's holy day. (Go figure that one out.) Jesus teaches what they do not—that those who are bent over, stooped down, and burdened with illness or worries deserve to be seen—noticed—and cared for, especially within the faith family, and especially on God's holy day. Jesus calls the leaders “hypocrites” because the healing and wholeness of people is of far greater importance than getting the ox out of a ditch or a horse to water on the Sabbath or keeping things “decent and in order.” Religious rules and rituals, no matter how revered, are secondary to addressing any suffering or need for prayer within

our midst. If followers of Christ fail to notice and pray for those who are hurting, it does not matter how eloquent the preaching, how beautiful the music, how rich the offering, or how beautiful and financially secure the church. Love in action is what matters. Praying for one another is our calling.

We may think, though, that Jesus' words are not very relevant here at St. Andrew. We certainly know who is sick and who needs our prayers and support. Or do we? This bent over woman symbolizes those who have gone unnoticed in sanctuaries since places of worship were first built. She is the elderly man dismissed due to memory loss. She is the stranger who sits in the back row and leaves before the benediction. She is the woman nodding off in the pew because she's exhausted after caring for her ill spouse. She is the parent whose child is going through trying times that no one knows about. She is the former member who now lives alone in a nursing home. She is the member who has been absent for several weeks and no one has noticed. She is the one dealing with crippling spirits of addiction and mental illness and hopelessness. She is part of us and part of any Body of Christ. And she also exists right beyond our doors in anyone bent over by oppression or poverty, abuse or prejudice. What will be our response to her? Will we notice her? Offer to pray for her? And if we need prayer, what will be our response to Christ's invitation to ask for healing and wholeness?

This morning, any of you who are feeling "bent over," or have on your heart someone else who is, will be invited to come forward for special prayer and anointing with oil, if desired, during the Prayers of the People. You may keep your prayer request in your hearts where it is known to you and God. What is important to remember is that healing is an action and a prerogative of God, not of me or the prayer team. Though some miracles are performed at the request and prayer of the one healed, the miracle in today's gospel comes simply through the goodness of Jesus and his compassion. This woman apparently was not seeking a healing, but when Jesus saw her, his heart went out to her and he healed her.

Remember also that when the woman was healed, she "stood up straight," a symbolic image of what grace does for us. Even if what we hope to be healed is not healed as we would like, we still are recipients of the grace of God through prayer, and we, too, are then empowered to stand up straight and to walk with a new confidence and dignity.

Jesus knows what we need before we ask Him. Our part is to remain faithful to his instruction to ask for what we need and to trust that in our faithfulness, he will give us what we need even before we ask. So let us be like this courageous woman who walked through the crowds to meet Jesus, and let us strive to be like Jesus, who noticed and cared for the one "bent over."

May it be so.