

“Set Free”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
August 25, 2019

Luke 13: 10-17

Jesus can offer comfort to the downtrodden, and assurance to the weak. Jesus can challenge the powerful, and speak words of judgment to the unjust. Throughout the gospels, we witness God speaking through his Son in a wide variety of ways.

There are two characters with whom Jesus interacts in this story: the woman and the leader of the synagogue. And it is through his interaction with them that we experience this contradiction of understanding Jesus. With the woman, Jesus is compassionate, concerned, and merciful. With the leader of the synagogue, Jesus is harsh, sharp, and critical. Perhaps it is also in these two characters that we see ourselves, and how we might experience God in our lives. Not in an identical way, but certainly in how our faith can lead us to hear the different ways God often speaks to us.

Let’s first look at the woman in this story. William Willimon describes her in the following way:

In my Bible she is identified as “the bent woman.” How would you like to be immortalized in Scripture that way? She was bent over, had been bent over, staring at the ground, back terribly contorted, for many, many years. She doesn’t appear to have a name to anyone in town. When they saw her, creeping down the street, body bent, eyes attempting to lift up from the ground, they didn’t say “Here comes Mary.” They said, “Here comes the bent woman, the crippled woman.”

That was her name and in her name was her life, her destiny, her whole sad fate. The woman doesn’t have a name, other than the one given to her by the town, a name based upon her disability. She doesn’t have an identity other than that of a victim. She doesn’t have a family, it seems, no occupation, nothing other than her deformity. She is the one who is bent, stooped, bearing upon her shoulders an invisible yet very heavy burden, the burden of being different, the burden of not looking like everyone else, the burden of not being able to do what everyone else does. She is the crooked woman, the bent woman.

She is there, I think, for everyone who is so named. She is “just a drunk,” or “slow,” “stupid,” “grossly overweight,” “blind as a bat,” “gimp.”

She is encountered by Jesus. And how Jesus refers to her. Jesus heals her, and that’s wonderful. For the first time in her adult life, she is able to stand up straight, to look straight ahead, to be restored to what we call normalcy. But perhaps just as wonderful is the way Jesus speaks to her, what Jesus says about her. He does not call her disabled, or

hindered, or a victim of life's unfairness, though from most points of view, she is. Jesus seems to have no need in making her a victim, so that her disability defines her whole life.

Rather, Jesus calls her "a daughter of Abraham." I think that's significant. This one whom we call the crooked woman, the bent woman, is called by Jesus a daughter of Abraham. What does that mean? Who was Abraham? Abraham was the great, great-granddaddy of Israel. Abraham was the one to whom, one starry night, a promise was given. God promised to make a great nation out of Abraham, a nation through which all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

She is a daughter of Abraham. She is an heir to the blessings of God. Moreover, as a daughter of Abraham, she is called to be a blessing to the whole world. She is meant for more than superficial, cruel, limiting labeling. She, bent over though she is, is part of God's great salvation of the whole world (William Willimon, "What's In A Name?" August 23, 1998, www.chapel.duke.edu/worship/sunday/viewsermon.aspx?id=84).

In contrast to the crippled woman, there is the leader of the synagogue. This healing is not viewed as an act of mercy by the Jewish leader, but rather as an act of defiance of God's law. Namely, it is a violation of the Fourth Commandment, that no work shall be done on the Sabbath, to keep it as a holy day before God. This is not the first time Jesus has gone to the synagogue and been challenged about doing work on the Sabbath, and it sets up another occasion for his acts of love to cause upheaval among the authorities.

Did you notice how the Jewish leader goes about sharing his displeasure? He doesn't confront Jesus directly; instead he speaks 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." In today's terminology, he is "triangling." The religious leader doesn't want to confront Jesus directly; he'd rather show his displeasure in a passive-aggressive way. So, instead of speaking directly to Jesus, he brings in a third-party - the crowds - to let Jesus know how this wonderful healing is actually an affront to the long-held customs of Jewish law.

Which is precisely the issue for the rabbi, that is, a difference in interpretation of the law between himself and Jesus. For him, it matters not that the woman has been released from her horrible affliction. That is not as important as maintaining the Sabbath as a day of complete rest. And in his protesting of Jesus' merciful act, he is blind to the greater good.

Which is how Jesus responds to the Jewish leader: appealing to the greater good. Doesn't everyone take their ox or donkey, untie it, and lead it to water on the Sabbath? If this is not considered "work," then surely giving back this woman her health and dignity could not be considered a violation of the Sabbath. In his response, Jesus claims the woman as "a daughter of Abraham," similar to how he will call Zacchaeus

later in Luke “a son of Abraham.” Both the woman and Zacchaeus, before their encounters with Jesus, were looked upon with shame by their communities. Now, after their respective experiences of healing and inclusion, they are claimed once again as a daughter and son of Abraham, giving to them their God-given identity.

Willimon continues: *Jesus means to name you. He will not let you acquiesce to the names the world wants to lay upon you. You are daughters, sons of Abraham. Your life is meant to count for something, to take its place on stage in God's great drama of redemption (ibid).*

Do we really believe that? Do we really accept the fact that Jesus means to name us? Do we really believe that we are a daughter of Abraham, a son of Abraham, and with that name, we are set free to live lives of joy and service to our Lord?

Or are we constantly weighed down by what the world lays upon us? Do we take on the labels, the assumptions, the identities that others form for us, and in so doing, we are so bent over we can never see God's grace right in front of us?

You know the names I'm talking about. Liberal and conservative. Nerd and jock. Insider and outsider. Queer and straight. Fat and skinny. These and many more are labels which we hear others speak, and directly or indirectly, they begin to cause us to stoop, to bend, to not see the world completely because we are under their weight.

But what if, instead of allowing the weight of those names to limit our ability to serve, we heard the name that is above every name, and received with grace and redemption the love he is sharing with each of us? What if the names the world gives – on the news, in social media, in whispered conversations – were countered with the names God gives: child of God; beloved; disciple; child of Abraham? And we heard those names more often and more frequently because of conversations with friends, involvement and activity at church, and a desire to deepen our faith journey? That is what Jesus is offering – to the bent woman, to the addicted man, to the lonely child, to the hurting wife, to the beggar on the street, to you, to me. How will we respond when he calls us over and says, “You are set free from your ailment”?

I believe one of the ways we are able to hear our Lord's voice and respond with clarity and faith is through our deepening connections as a community of faith. It is in meaningful interactions and relationships that our faith is grounded, refined, and strengthened for the journey we call life.

That is why we are excited at John Knox to be embarking on a year-long journey of formative learning, starting this month. Through a grant we've received from the Center for Congregations, we will all be invited consider anew why this place – this Open. Caring. Community. – matters to our lives of faith. Throughout August, we've asked you to complete a short survey, either online or in paper form, with questions

that speak to why John Knox matters to you, and how this church can continue to meet your spiritual needs. For those of you who have completed that survey, thank you! For those of you who have not, you've still got time! Take five minutes after worship and fill one out on the table in the main hallway. Or look at the weekly email for the link to the online version. Or if you need further help, let me know and I'll make sure you have a chance to complete it.

Next month, we will have a congregation-wide event on September 15 after worship, and it'll be a chance for you to meet Ritch Hochstetler from the organization, ULEAD. They are going to be our primary resource for our year-long project, and it'll be a time full of fun and learning about who we are and how we relate and interact with one another. Look for more details in the September Tidings and the weekly bulletins and emails.

Finally, you're going to be invited to be a part of what we are calling a Table Group, a form of a small group, for a period of 3-6 months, beginning later this fall. Some of us know a lot of people in this church, some of us know a few people. Some of us are active in many things, while some of us are active in a few, particular things. What if we all took time to be connected to a small group of people for a period of time, and in so doing we learned more about others we already knew and those we did not know well? What if we heard one another's stories in a deeper way - over a meal, at coffee, through walks, doing something together - and by truly hearing each other, we heard God's voice saying, "You are a daughter of Abraham. You are a son of Abraham. You are my child, my disciple, my beloved."

I hope you will share in this journey we are embarking on as a church. I hope you will try something new, and consider, amid all that keeps us busy and occupied, how the church can be an asset and help for all that weighs you down. I pray that our congregation might hear God's voice in a real, fresh way in these twelve months, as we are called once again to be an Open. Caring. Community.

Don't walk through life bent over. Claim the name God has given you - sons and daughters of Abraham. Allow yourself to be set free from what weighs you down, so you might serve the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength, and all your might.

Thanks be to God. Amen.