

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost C

Isaiah 58:9b-14

Psalm 103:1-8

Hebrews 12:18-29

Luke 13:10-17

the Rev. John Roberts

What Happens When We Encounter God?

Luke is the only one of the Gospel writers who tells this story. We don't know exactly where it happens. We do know it happens in a synagogue on the Sabbath. We don't know who the woman is. She is not given a name. We don't know how old she is or if she has family there with her. We don't know if she is well respected in the community. But we can assume that everyone there in the synagogue knew her. How could they not know her? Everyone could see that she was "bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight" and that "a spirit had crippled her for eighteen years."

We don't know if she was there in the synagogue on the Sabbath out of duty or if she had heard something about the itinerant rabbi who would be teaching there this day. But there she was in the women's section separated from Jesus by all the men who had first place in the synagogue.

The thing about living your life "bent over and unable to stand up straight" is that your ability to see is severely disabled. You can't see the person right in front of you, let alone someone seated at the front of a crowd. She may have been able to hear Jesus but couldn't see him. But Jesus saw her. He called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free (the Greek actually says "untied") from your ailment." Then he laid his hands on her and she stood up straight and began praising God.

Of course she began praising God. If we could imagine ourselves being healed from an ailment that had kept us bent over and burdened both physically and emotionally for 18 years, we would do the same thing!

BUT! The leader of the synagogue didn't see it that way. It was his responsibility to see that the Sabbath would be the Sabbath. There were rules to follow. The Torah, both in Exodus and Deuteronomy were very specific. Maybe you can recall the first sentence of that commandment, "Remember the Sabbath Day, and keep it holy." But there's more and the synagogue leader wanted the crowd there to remember that. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns."

Through the centuries, the Sabbath law was clarified again and again. The Mishna clearly states that if one dislocated his hand or foot, he may not pour cold water on it; but he may wash it in his usual way. And if it he is healed, he is healed. No extraordinary measures could be taken on the Sabbath. Jesus might have gotten away with it if he had just spoken to the woman. But he touched her! A woman! On the Sabbath! And the synagogue leader could point out that Jesus had broken the Sabbath law!

I remember living in St. Louis in the 1970's being able to buy shoes on Sunday but not being able to buy shoe laces because lacing ones shoes was considered work which could not be done on the Sabbath. And just one year ago, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered pastors were released from the bondage of rules within our own ELCA and welcomed. Sabbath rules, it seems, were meant to be broken.

And Jesus sees the leader of the synagogue just as broken, bent down and burdened as the woman. The spirit that had bent her body for 18 years was no different than the spirit which had enslaved him. The symptoms may have looked different; one visibly bent, the other with a spirit which had burdened the people of Israel for centuries – a spirit misshapen by a false sense of religious piety and obligation. Jesus was there that day to heal them all; to enable them all to stand upright. He was there to “untie” the woman bent over; to “untie” the synagogue leader; to “untie” them all from whatever spirit had kept them in bondage.

And today, Jesus is here to untie you and enable you to stand upright and join the chorus of that synagogue who rejoiced at the wonderful things he was doing and still does. The woman did not approach Jesus and ask to be healed. Jesus sought her out. She experienced the truth of what the Sabbath is really about. God gives us the command to rest on the Sabbath so that God can re-create us; untie us from all of those things that bind us and raise us upright to sing and pray and praise our God. It is very important that our spirits be bound to God and not to the diseases and diseases that cause us to walk through life bent over and burdened.

Shortly, we will enter into a Sabbath remembrance of our own condition and of the new persons we become through God's life in our life. Some of us will remember our baptisms as we trace the cross on ourselves as was done in our baptism “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” We will confess that it is Sin that binds our lives and we will feel the very hand of God untie us from those bonds and lift us upright again.

We will all have the opportunity to kneel at the altar and ask for healing. Some of us will ask to be healed from physical ailments. But all of us need to be healed from the things that bind our spirits: racism and sexism that

worm their way into our lives just by being a part of our society; homophobia and Islamophobia; the very human tendencies to put ourselves and our desires ahead of the need of the homeless, the hungry, the victims of violence both in our neighborhood and throughout the world. We believe that Jesus, who has promised to be among us when even two or three are gathered together, will himself place his hand on us and lift us up to give praise to our Creator.

We will shake hands and hug and even kiss each other knowing that it is God who has given us to one another to be a community of hope and power; powerful enough to make a difference in our own homes, in our neighborhoods and throughout the world. And then, we will gaze with anticipation to the table, the Lord's table and ours, expecting God to enter our very bodies in, with, and under bread and wine. Martin Luther, in his writings in the Smallcald Articles, tells us that the elements that make up the bread and wine are the elements of Christ's body and blood merging with our own flesh and blood; a kind of molecular fusion of Jesus' resurrected life with our own.

Some of us use a centuries old custom which reminds us so powerfully of what Jesus did in that synagogue and what he does to us today. At the words, "holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might, heaven and earth are full of your glory" we bow – we bend our bodies over as Isaiah did when he received his vision of God in heaven. And then, as if Jesus himself lifts us upright, we stand straight to sing, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

We will pray, as Jesus taught us, to our Father. We will sing to Jesus, the Lamb who unties us from our Sin and lifts us upright to a life filled with peace. And once again, touching ourselves with the blessing of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we will be sent out into the world in peace to love and serve God. "When in our music God is glorified, and adoration leaves no room for pride, it is as though the whole creation cries: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"

God calls us in our worship as Jesus called the woman bent over in the synagogue. In our worship God frees us from the spirits that weigh us down. In our worship God binds us together as a community to be loosed upon the world. It will be this Sabbath experience that will nourish us again and again until that day when God's kingdom will finally be complete. What a joyful thing it is to be here today.

And we are freed for one more thing: honesty. We need this Sabbath. As much as our bodies need food and exercise and sometimes medical care, our spirits need to be fed by God's very entrance into our lives.

“Let every instrument be tuned for praise; let all rejoice who have a voice to raise; and may God give us faith to sing always. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!”