

Sunday, August 21,2022

Sermon: Proper 16 (C)

Glenn A. Beard, Jr.

Text: Luke 13:10-17

All throughout his earthly ministry, people were coming to Jesus - people who could not see, people who could not hear, and people who could not speak. Lepers came to him, and people who were paralyzed were brought to him by others. In this whole flow of desperate humanity coming to Jesus for healing, this woman who is bent double captures the imagination as Luke tells her story here in chapter 13. Her ailment was certainly no worse than the others Jesus encounters, but it seems particularly cruel. Those of you who have ever had back or neck issues can likely relate to the blessing it is when you are able to stand tall and to be in balance, to feel like you are in alignment, with your spine long and your head floating up on top of your spine – so that you are open and free and strong and present and able to let breath into your body.

You'd understand her situation better if at this moment you could imagine what life must have been like for her. Luke says that she was bent over and quite unable to stand up straight. Try getting into that position sometime, and see what it's like to be that way. You'll notice how little you can see, how hard it is to breathe, how hard it is to speak, the sense of constriction, powerlessness, the inability to look anyone in the eye and you'll notice the pain that starts to shoot up your legs and your back. And then, imagine standing this way for 18 long years, as Jesus says.

While this woman's condition has all of these physical symptoms and sensations, at its root it's not a physical ailment but a spiritual one. Luke describes the woman as having a "spirit" that keeps her crippled, echoing earlier descriptions of those who come to Jesus with maladies that are described as evil spirits. And later, Jesus describes her affliction as being bound by Satan. Her affliction is spiritual, she's in bondage to the powers of evil that corrupt this world, captive to these powers and principalities. And so, Jesus does not use the language of healing when he removes this affliction from her. Instead, he uses the language of setting free: "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." And later, arguing with the leader of the synagogue about whether it was right to cure her on the Sabbath, Jesus says, just as you would unbind an ox or donkey to lead it to water on the Sabbath, "Should not this woman, whom Satan bound for 18 long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?"

Jesus tells us at the beginning of his ministry that his work in this world is all about freedom: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me... to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18). This mission propels Jesus throughout Galilee and now even toward Jerusalem, to take on the burden of the powers and principalities in his own body. So, when he sees this woman who is bound, who is captive, he does not delay even a minute before calling her over, laying hands upon her, and declaring her free. It might seem that the leader of the synagogue has a perfectly reasonable point in saying that there are six days of the week when work ought to be done, so can't this woman, who after all has had this ailment for 18 years, wait just one more day to be cured? But for Jesus, the answer is clearly no – the mission to bring freedom is so urgent that it cannot wait even one more day.

What are the burdens that we carry today? What is it that keeps us bound? What is it that makes our backs bend and our shoulders hunch - that prevents us from breathing, from seeing, from speaking? Maybe it is worries and cares. Maybe it is dealing with addiction in our family. Maybe it is the expectations of others, or our own expectations of ourselves, that cause us to live a life that is not really our own. Maybe we are simply bent double by exhaustion, after two + years of a pandemic. Maybe we are bowed low by the suffering of this world, the scourge of racism, a deepening environmental crisis, political polarization dividing our country to such an extent that increasingly we do not even share a common sense of what is true anymore.

Whatever our burdens may be, Jesus' urgent desire is for our freedom, and he reaches out to you, to me, even now, to offer that freedom. The freedom that he offers is not freedom in the way we think of it in the American context. For us, freedom most often means being left alone, or being able to do whatever we want. But in the Bible, and theologically speaking, freedom means to be able to choose not whatever we want to do but what we most want to do. Freedom, in other words, means being free to choose God, to choose to worship God, to follow Christ, to be led by the Holy Spirit, and in doing all of this, to choose to be the particular person God has created us to be. That is true freedom, the only true freedom. Freedom is the reorientation of our lives back to God, the spiritual freedom that is the antidote to spiritual captivity by the powers of evil that bind us just as they bound the woman Jesus set free.

Receiving Christ's gift of freedom does not mean that the realities of racism, or environmental crisis, or our own personal cares and concerns go away, right away. When this woman was set free and stood up straight, she was still a woman living in a patriarchal culture; she was still a daughter of Abraham, living like the rest of her people under imperial occupation. These realities had not gone away, but she was made free in relation to them. She was no longer crushed by them, because God's power and presence had come upon her, and this divine power, working in her, could do so much more than she could ask or imagine. This freedom that transformed her in her very bones was an initial sign of the breaking in of God's realm, like the mustard seed that Jesus talks about right after this story, which starts out so humbly and then grows into a magnificent tree, or the small bit of yeast that leavens an entire loaf of bread. The reality of the freedom God grants takes root in humble ways but then expands outward, more and more, to transform the world, to set it free from its bondage and give it the liberty and the glory that God intends for it.

This freedom is the ultimate destiny of all creation, the goal for which God created it, and toward which the Spirit is drawing us. But it can be tasted right now in our lives today, sometimes in small and humble ways, like the mustard seed or the grains of yeast. It can be tasted, first of all, in Sabbath. When Jesus cures this woman on the Sabbath, it is not only that he cannot wait one more day to bestow his gift of freedom. It is that the Sabbath is itself all about freedom. The Sabbath was given to the people of Israel as one of the ten commandments, and God bestows the commandments beginning with these words, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." It is God the liberator who gives all of the commandments, including the Sabbath commandment, as a gift of freedom. The Sabbath sets us free because it reorients us to God. In laying aside work, we remind ourselves that it is God who is in charge, not we ourselves. We rest in order to come to know, in our very bones, that God is God and we are not, that everything we do is done by God's grace, and not by our own power alone. We set things down, we let things be, so that we can learn ever more deeply that we are valuable not because of what we produce or the work we do, but simply

because we are children of God. “I am the Lord your God,” says the God who gives the Sabbath, “you shall have no other gods but me.” In our very being, in our creation, we were made to be in relationship to God. This is the foundation of our identity, and the Sabbath is when we take the time to recognize this, to return to this, and, in this true identity, to be free.

Even though keeping the Sabbath is not a suggestion, but a commandment, in our culture we tend to be pretty terrible at keeping the Sabbath. Long gone are the days when all the stores were closed on the Sabbath; there is little sense culturally of marking this day as any different from the others. More than this, we live in a society and an economy that defines human value by how hard we work, how much we produce, how much money we make, and the Sabbath is profoundly alien to this whole way of assigning value. For this reason, to stop, to rest, to keep the Sabbath is deeply counter-cultural. It might seem like keeping the Sabbath is a privilege that only people with a certain degree of affluence can afford, that for those working two and three jobs just to stay afloat, it’s impossible to observe Sabbath. But even in these cases it is possible to find a few minutes in the day just to be, to rest in God’s presence, to taste the freedom that is your right as baptized children of God

In addition to keeping Sabbath, if you want to taste God’s freedom right now in the midst of your life, there’s something simple that I recommend: to stand. Stand tall as this woman from Luke’s story did once Jesus set her free from her bondage. Stand and feel your feet under you, your spine long and straight and feel your strength and your openness. Feel your God-given freedom in your very own body. Know that you are free to breathe and to see and to speak, free to praise God, as the woman did as soon as she could stand up straight. You are free to participate in Christ’s work of bringing freedom to this burdened and bent-over world. You are free to be like the mustard seed that grows into a tree that shelters others in its branches. You are free to be like the yeast that transforms the dough into something that can feed multitudes. God’s freedom is as close to us as moments of rest, as near to us as our bodies and Jesus does not want to wait any longer to give us this freedom. Thanks be to God!

AMEN