

Sermon 8.21.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

Isaiah 58:9b-14 | Psalm 103:1-8 | **Luke 13:10-17**

I almost didn't even go to synagogue that day. Look, *I know*, you're supposed to go to worship every Sabbath, but over the last eighteen years it just become harder and harder. See, eighteen years ago something happened to my body, and I couldn't stand up straight anymore. I just couldn't. And when that happened, everything changed.

Do you have *any idea* what it's like to not be able to stand up straight for eighteen years? My body hurt all the time. I couldn't look up at the sky or make eye contact with people without twisting my neck. Daily chores that were easy for everyone else were *hard* for me. On bad days I couldn't see where I was walking, and I ran into things all the time. For eighteen years I looked at the ground. Just stared at the ground everywhere I went. Nothing makes you feel down and worthless like having to stare down at the ground every moment of every day.

But the worst was how other people reacted and treated me. See, they grew up learning the same thing I did – that when someone has something really wrong with their body, it's a sign of evil. That they're possessed by an evil spirit. That they committed some horrible sin that God is punishing them for. But over those eighteen years, I spent a lot of time thinking, and while I'm not perfect, I don't think I'm that much worse than the people around me either. And no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't come up with any reason for why this had happened to me, or what I had done that was so wrong, or why God might be mad at me.

But that didn't stop the people around me. They started to whisper. Maybe they thought that since I was crippled maybe I was deaf too, but I could hear everything they were

saying. They were saying that I was cursed. Unclean. That I was dirty and sinful. People started to avoid me. Even my friends. They were scared that if they spent time with me, I might make them unclean or God might curse them too. After a while, people didn't even remember my name. I was just *that* woman. The bent over woman. The crippled woman. The broken woman.

And I gotta tell ya – as time went on, it just became easier to avoid people. I mean why *should* I go outside when people are going to whisper and stare and shun me, wash their hands after being around me and never touch anything that I touch?

Even at synagogue, people didn't sit near me. For eighteen years I spent all my money on doctors, I gave every offering I could, and I prayed over and over for God to heal me. You can judge me if you want, but after a while I stopped going to synagogue. To be honest, I wondered if God cared about me at all. I wondered if God could even see me.

So I almost didn't go to worship that morning, but at the last minute I changed my mind because I heard that Jesus was going to be in town. Everywhere I went, everyone was always talking about Jesus and how loving and kind he was. They were all amazed at the arguments he got in with the religious leaders and his new teachings on loving other people. He was on his way to Jerusalem and was passing through town, so I figured I'd go and see for myself.

And everything started out like normal. I was in the back, like always.

But then Jesus saw me, and he told me to come up in front of everyone.

I was so scared! Why is he calling *me* up there? It's so embarrassing. I hate being in front of people. Is he going to humiliate me in front of everyone? Is he going to talk about God hating me or about that horrible sin I must have committed?

If I could have melted through the floor right then, I would have.

But Jesus didn't do anything like that. Instead *he* bent down to look *me* in the eye, and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." (v. 12) I thought that was a funny word to use, *ailment*. He didn't say "you're free from those evil demons" or "you're forgiven for the horrible sin you committed." He made it sound like the problems with my body had nothing to do with my spirit, they it wasn't my fault, that it had nothing to do with how much God loved me. He made it sound like it was just a medical thing, like a sore tooth or a broken bone. With just one sentence, Jesus declared that people who have disabilities are *not* worth less or loved less by God, but that they're God's children too.

I was still trying to wrap my head around what he had said when Jesus put his hand on my back and helped me to stand up straight. Just like that! Do you all have any idea how *good* it feels to stretch for the first time in eighteen years? It was the most amazing relief.

And that's when it hit me. Because of Jesus, I wasn't *that* woman anymore. I wasn't the bent over woman or the crippled woman. I wasn't the cursed, unloved, unclean, broken woman anymore. Because of Jesus, *I* was the woman who was loved and healed by God! I had wondered if God could even see me, and it turned out that Jesus was able to see me even when I was hunched over in the back of the room. He showed me that God loves me.

But not everybody was happy for me. The leader of the synagogue was angry at Jesus because he had healed me on the Sabbath. See, everyone knows that the Sabbath is supposed to be a day of rest when you don't do any work. When God first gave Moses the 10 Commandments, the third commandment said that we have to remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Since God rested on the seventh day, *we* rest on the seventh day. It says in the Bible, "you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave,

your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns.” (Exodus 20:10) Even slaves are supposed to get a day of rest on the Sabbath, since our people used to be slaves in Egypt and we remember what that was like. (Deuteronomy 5:12-15) Maybe sometime your pastor will preach a sermon about paying people a living wage so they can rest on the Sabbath too, I don’t know.

I didn’t know what Jesus was going to say back to the religious leader. I mean, our rabbis have spent a lot of time figuring out what counts as ‘work’ and what’s okay to do on the Sabbath and what’s *not*. The rules are really strict, and technically Jesus *was* breaking the law.

And ever since that day when I was healed, I’ve been trying to make sense of what Jesus said next. He said, “You hypocrite! Don’t you untie your animals and lead them to water on the Sabbath? Then why shouldn’t this woman be set free on the Sabbath too?” It didn’t make much sense to me at the time, but I think I understand what he was saying a little better now.

I think Jesus was saying that we’ve been looking at things wrong. We’ve always thought that perfectly obeying God’s commands was the way to make God love us. But when your faith is all about following rules and commands, eventually you can become so obsessed with them that you lose track of what’s important, that you forget about God and why he gave the commands in the first place. Besides, following laws and commands doesn’t make us *love* God more or love others more, and I think that’s what Jesus cares about most. Commands are good, but *love is better*.

When Jesus healed me, it was like he was telling everyone that God cares about my well-being and health more than laws and commands. That God loves people more than rules, and taking care of other people is more important to our faith than any rites or rituals.

Sure, rules and commands are important, and even good, but not when they hold people down or keep them bound. When Jesus was visiting another town, he told them that, “The Sabbath was made to serve us; we weren’t made to serve the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:27, MSG) God’s commands are good, but they’re not meant to be revered for their own sake, they’re meant to help connect us to God and live more fulfilling lives. The whole point of the third commandment is that God loves us so much that he wants us to rest so we can take care of ourselves and have some joy in life. After all, God made us, and God know that we’re tempted to always be going, going, going and doing, doing, doing, so God gave us a command to slow down and rest every week so we don’t wear ourselves out.

At least that’s what I think Jesus was trying to say. I’m still not positive, though I think about it all the time. And you know what? I go to worship a lot more now. I realized that keeping the Sabbath holy means making time for God every week. And even though my body is healed, my soul sometimes feels worn out, and hearing how much God loves me makes me feel refreshed and encouraged and just *good*.

I’ll never forget that day. Jesus healed me. Not because of anything I had done, but just because he loved me. In fact, I’m starting to think that the whole reason Jesus was born, and the whole reason he’s traveling to Jerusalem is *because* he loves me, and he loves *you*. I’ll never forget that day when I was just staring at the ground, all the way in the back, and Jesus looked up and saw me. And here’s the important part I really want to tell you. He sees you too. Amen.