

Isaiah 58:9b-14; Psalm 103:1-8;
Hebrews 12:18-29; Luke 13:10-17

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

What if Jesus had done things in that synagogue in **reverse order**? What if Jesus, rather than first healing the bent-over woman, opted instead to debate at length with the leader of the synagogue the finer points of theology surrounding work on the Sabbath, and **then** got around to healing the bent-over woman?

Well, it would be a different story, for one thing. And it wouldn't be half the good news that this story is. But imagine it: If, instead of immediately healing that woman of her deformity, Jesus chose to try to convince synagogue authorities that such an activity was not breaking Sabbath laws . . . if he first attempted to seek their approval and receive their blessing . . . then I'll wager the Sabbath would have been over long before the healing ever took place. And the Sabbath, given as a gift to his people by the Lord God, would have been a day just like any other day, a long drawn-out day, for a woman who had suffered for 18 years.

Not that she necessarily came to the synagogue expecting healing. Unlike so many folks who, having heard about Jesus' miracles, boldly petitioned him for help and begged him for healing, this woman does not initiate any such discussion with Jesus . . . or the leaders of the synagogue, for that matter. She is simply there, on the Sabbath, at worship. But I wonder if her heart was in it, or if she was just going through the motions. I wonder if there was within her a tiny glimmer of hope that that day, that Sabbath day, would be different, or if that spark of hope had long since been extinguished. How many Sabbaths are contained in 18 years? Do the math. That is unrelenting suffering.

And I wonder if there are people in this room, in this building today, this Sabbath day, whose bruised hearts are not in it, and who are just going through the motions.

Of course, some of us in this room, in this building, may not realize there's a bent-over woman next to us. Partially because people can take their deformities—the hurts that need healing, the chains that need breaking—and hide them so well from the rest of us. Then again, sometimes we do realize there's a bent-over woman next to us, but we choose to ignore her. How convenient that the woman in that synagogue is bent over—no one needs to meet her gaze. They can look down upon her, pity her from afar, but they never really have to look her in the eye, never truly see her pain, acknowledge her humanity, offer their help, and then act as instruments of God's healing. Don't you think it's rather amazing the bent-over woman continues to go to worship, considering her situation? It's amazing that some of you, bent-over as you are, continue to come here. How long do your Sabbath days seem? And how many more people are out there, somewhere, bent-over?

Remember, I raised a hypothetical situation. I imagined Jesus spending his Sabbath day arguing with synagogue leaders about whether healing a person with a chronic condition was actual work, and consequently against the Jewish Law. At the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, healing was only permitted on the Sabbath if death was imminent—if that person wouldn't **make** it to the day after the Sabbath. Hence the argument made by the leaders of the synagogue—they suggested Jesus could have waited until the day after to heal her. After all, she wasn't going to die.

It's not difficult to imagine such a scenario. We see this kind of thing all the time. Many institutions get caught up in these types of time-consuming discussions while the needy wait on

the sidelines, while the bent-over get ignored. Whether it's bureaucratic red-tape or hours spent on the phone navigating customer service or reams of paper used for documentation or multiple signatures required for approval, we do indeed live in a society where it seems to take forever for the just thing, the right thing to be done. It even happens in the institution of the Church. An issue of ministry and mission goes to a committee for further review . . . and we let it stay there, for a good long time. A council discusses and debates a topic at length . . . and we never act. A member of the church staff is informed about someone in the congregation who has a particular need . . . and we fail to respond. Sabbath day comes and goes.

I have in my hands a nicely-bound volume of research compiled by a sister congregation which is interested in beginning a contemporary worship service and doing outreach in their community. This booklet has plenty of information contained in it. I will find some of it useful for our own purposes here at Trinity. However, some of the information is what I and the other worship leaders and volunteers here already know from the actual doing of this worship. And that's a key point. See, that particular Lutheran congregation has been studying and researching and compiling for a long time. They were poised to begin a new worship service at Easter, after months of deliberation. It was put on hold. Now the target date has been moved to sometime in the fall, but it's uncertain whether that target date will come and go as well. Who knows when the worship service will begin? But this is, as I said, a very nice booklet.

That is not to say the Church should **not** deliberate or think before it begins a new ministry, or when it confronts an important issue. Yes, the Church needs to call upon God's wisdom and his Spirit of discernment, and then work through appropriate channels like committees, study groups, elected councils, and church staff persons. Wise and faithful decisions can be made through those means. But woe to us if we allow opportunities for real ministry to get mired in institutional quicksand. A fellow pastor told me he calls that "death by analysis."

Of course, the hypothetical situation I imagined in the synagogue was just that—hypothetical. Luke says Jesus' first order of business—and always his first order of business—was to offer himself and his life-giving power to someone in need of it. He saw the woman and recognized her needy condition, but he had more than a detached kind of pity upon her. Jesus had compassion, and he initiated the entire healing process. He didn't seek approval or blessing from human authorities. He had that approval and blessing already from his heavenly Father. Instead, he did exactly what Isaiah prophesied. He did exactly what he had been sent into our world to do: Release the captive, free the oppressed, heal the afflicted, and proclaim the year of God's favor. Calling her over, Jesus proclaimed, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." Jesus laid his hands on her, and this woman, bent-over for 18 years, could at last stand straight on the Sabbath day and do what she longed to do, lo, all those Sabbaths before: **Give praise to God.**

I think that congregation that wants to begin a new service for outreach to the community should **begin** the service. A field of dreams? Build it and they will come? Well, maybe not right away. It may evolve in surprising ways over time. And that's OK. Those of you who have been worshipers at this contemporary service for a long time know that we have changed and grown, the worship has changed and grown over seven years. We continue to grow—in more important ways than numbers. I hope and trust we've grown in ways that draw bent-over people into the presence of God, where healing can take place through the goodness of God's word and the nourishment of his meal, through the power of this music and the fellowship of our sisters and brothers. I am so glad we did not discuss and debate and research and compile, only to discover the Sabbath was past, and the bent-over woman had gone home.

Here it is, the Sabbath again. If someone in this place is bent-over, may the Spirit of our Lord open our eyes, move our hearts to compassion, and initiate in each of us spontaneous acts of love and mercy that bring healing. Then together all of us can stand straight and tall, full of Spirited-life, and praise God. **AMEN.**

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