

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

Good morning.

In my office, I have these two pieces of art that hang on the wall behind my desk. They're made out of hand-cut pieces of oak board, beveled around the edges and on each one of those boards there is a picture. One is a picture of hands folded in prayer. The other is a picture of Leonardo Di Vinci's portrait of the last supper. Each contains a hand-painted note to me that is underneath of each of the pictures. Now, in the artistic community, these two items would not be considered masterpieces, but to me they are very special. Not only because of what they represent, how they communicate the love of God that we feel through prayer, or through the sacrament, but because they were made as a gift for me, from my 60-year-old cousin who lives every day in a body bound by cerebral palsy.

It makes me wonder, "What binds us today?" For some of us we suffer with bodies that are wearing out, arthritic joints that don't seem to move as easily as they did when we were younger, or maybe we are continuing to fight a disease, while being assisted by the benefits of all that modern medicine can manufacture. For some in the body of Christ, being bound means suffering from mental illnesses, or emotional stresses that rob us of the way that we can enjoy life to its fullest.

But there are other things that bind us: struggling in a commercialized society that measures success in terms of productivity, just how many widgets can you produce in an hour, how many sales can you make for the month? How much more can you do with less? Maybe we are bound by the opinions of others, worried about having just the right clothes for back-to-school. Or we might be worried about how our hair might look, or what people will think about the kind of car we are driving. We are also bound by the 24x7 connectivity we have, thanks to advances in cell phones, the internet, email, and pagers. All those things keep us connected, but don't allow us to disconnect. And try as we may, we can't seem to separate from all that binds us, for a Sabbath.

How many of you remember those days long ago, when Sundays were almost mandated to be a day of worship? Sundays meant that you got up early in the morning, put on your best clothes, and you went to church and maybe in the afternoon you spent time with family and friends. And just in case we were tempted, to do something else, we had Blue Laws, that kept all of the stores closed. The mall wasn't open, and there was no work to be done those days. It was as though it was more important to be in church, than to worship God.

Even as you went into that worship service, there were rules or practices, that shaped the service. There are some people who would say that even though we are assembled today to worship God, we really aren't worshipping. We just don't fit that mold. In the past, we might have marched through those Sundays, we went through those motions, but at least on some level it was as though, our going through the motions was going to get God to come to us on our terms.

Sometimes we frame it in ways that puts the focus on us: Was I pleased with worship today? Was I edified? Were my needs met? Did I get anything out of that sermon? We have to be

careful not to trample on the Sabbath, careful not to pursue our own interest. Sabbath-keeping should involve, at its very core, glorifying and truly praising God. We should encounter God in this life. At some level the gospel of Jesus Christ does not exist to meet our needs, but to transform them. Not to connect to our world, but to change it.

Jesus Christ changes the world as he encounters that woman in the synagogue in our Gospel lesson this morning. The woman in our lesson today is very interesting. She is a very interesting part of the whole story. We don't know very much about her. We don't know why she was in the synagogue, she just simply appeared. We may ask ourselves, did she come there to worship? Did she stumble into the place by accident? Did she come there seeking something? Maybe even assistance with what was ailing her. We don't really know what kind of ailment she was suffering from. Only that she was suffering from a spirit of weakness that kept her unable to stand upright.

Now, let's put ourselves in this woman's place. We walk into the synagogue, we are hunched over from about the waist, the same way we have been walking for the last 18 years! Do you think the greeter at the door welcomed her into the synagogue? Probably not. First she was a woman and in those days that automatically meant second class citizenship. But she was also a woman with an infirmity, which meant she was unclean and speaking to her, or touching her, would have defiled you.

There is a man teaching and he calls to her, and tells her that she has been set free. She has been loosened from all that has been binding her. He comes over and lays his hands on her, and she stands upright for the first time in eighteen years and she immediately begins praising God.

It is important that we understand Jesus' actions. He doesn't say that the woman is cured of anything. Most Bibles and even the Trinity Today describe this lesson as "Jesus heals on the Sabbath." But the word that Jesus uses when he speaks to her is not normally translated as curing. It translates to "has been released." Has been set free. It is a form of the same word that Jesus uses when he speaks to the president of the synagogue and others in the crowd, and he describes how they untie their donkeys and their oxen from their manger so they can get a drink of water on the Sabbath. It is also a form of the same word that he uses to describe the woman as a daughter of Abraham who should be released from that which has been binding her for the last 18 years. It is the leader of the synagogue who claims that Jesus has cured this lady, and according to Sabbath Laws you can not cure on the Sabbath, unless death is imminent.

Was honoring the Sabbath, and all of the rules that it entailed, more important than releasing this woman from what had held her in bondage? Her ailment was not life threatening, but then many of the things that bind us are not life threatening either. Jesus could have waited until the next day, but Jesus had more to do and more to say that day, than to simply remove that physical ailment from the woman in the synagogue. In releasing her from what was keeping her bound, he restored her to become a participant in the promise that God made to Abraham. He brought her back into relationship with God. And by doing so on the Sabbath, he also sent a message that said that the promise that God made to Abraham that being participants in God's promise, is realized only when we break through those societal norms and free people from what binds them. So I ask you, did the people in the synagogue encounter God that day?

The woman in the story only takes a few actions when she appears there. She stands up, and she

praises. I think that the key in her actions, is that she does so in respond to grace – that free gift that she gets from Jesus Christ. We as Christ-followers who are bound in this broken world, who are captive to sin, have been called in our baptism, touched by Word and sacrament, not because we are particularly worthy, not even because we have asked Jesus to step in, but because we have a gracious God who loves us, and who on the cross freed us from bondage and brought us back into relationship.

We may not have been cured, but we have been released. And our response to having been released should be to appear, to stand as we are able, and to praise God in whatever fashion that may take: attending worship, daily prayer, or even creating rough-looking pieces of art that spread the good news of Jesus Christ to all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.