

Luke 13:10-21

A Little Bit At A Time

Sometimes we have found ourselves in tight circumstances, physical afflictions, or emotional stress, financial straits, events bigger than we are, loneliness, separation. Bound by situations that leave us with a sense of hopelessness and despair. That is the way of the world, and always has been, and the woman in our passage from 2000 years ago knew that fact. I wonder about this woman in the synagogue. Why did Jesus heal her? Surely others were there who had physical ailments and other problems, and Jesus didn't heal them. He didn't cure everyone- even if all the crowd wanted their moment under the hands of Jesus, to feel health and vigor surge through their bodies. That is why they kept coming- "Jesus, touch me next!" But he did not heal everyone. Didn't wave his arms over them and shout, "Be well!" But he reached out to this woman. Because he saw that her faith was great? that her pain was extraordinary? Did he see humility or courage or hope despite everything in her life?

Or did he choose her to make a theological point? Did he intentionally perform this act on this day to start a discussion about religious law? Was Jesus trying to show us the true teaching about the Sabbath? Was he telling us

something about God, and what God wants and demands of us, what God has given to us; and something about the meaning of our lives?

This is a story that may remind you of the more famous story of a woman healed, the woman with the 12-year flow of blood, from chapter 8. In both, Jesus heals a woman with a long-term health issue; the crowd is present in both, and watching as well, are two rulers of synagogues. There are differences, though. The first takes place outdoors, where the woman pushes through the press of the crowd to touch Jesus for healing. But in our story today, the woman doesn't ask for anything, rather Jesus sees her and calls her; he doesn't even ask if she wants to be healed; doesn't say, "Your faith has made you well," as the gospels writers have it so often. No, he states, "Woman, you are freed from your infirmity." In chapter 8, the woman with the blood was healed, and Jesus said, "Your faith has saved you," or "healed you." But here in chapter 13, the author has a different point to make, and Jesus says that she is "free."

Jesus is not presented to us in this scripture as a healer, but as an emancipator. Here is a woman bent and bound by osteoporosis, and the powerful word and touch of Jesus frees her from that bondage. And the ruler of the synagogue complains! I wonder about him- a miracle right in front of him, and he

says this isn't the right time for it! He completely misses the point that God is a God of freedom and not slavery, of wholeness and not disease, of straightness and strength, and not crooked weakness; God of the imminent presence, not God of delay, not God afar off; and not God of rules and regulations, except as they help to heal and liberate his creatures.

In the telling of this story, the author takes it a step deeper. The woman is not simply confined in a poorly working body. She is "bound by Satan," Jesus says, and her physical limitation, her "spirit of infirmity," is a sign of evil's rule over the earth. And now, here comes one with the power to deliver her from that. Look at what the passage says about Jesus. He has come close enough to see, he cares enough to call to her, has might enough to make her whole, and authority enough to declare the true meaning of the law. That would be a full day's work for most of us. And he saves her from the tyranny of sickness and decrepitude and despair. He saves her for God's rule.

This reading includes the two short parables at the end, because I believe the author meant for them to be part of the story. They help explain the story. "What is the kingdom of God like?" Jesus asks. In other words, what is the *rule* of God like? Here is a woman who has just escaped the tyrant's rule and entered God's

rule. Jesus freed her for God, even though the ruler of the synagogue would have her remain in slavery to religion. The commandment concerning the Sabbath- and all of religious law- had become a thing to bind the people to the interpreters of it.

But here, God's rule, God's Kingdom is like a seed that is planted and grows into a tree, and the birds rest in its shade. Or the Kingdom is like 50 pounds of flour with just a spoonful of yeast mixed into the middle of it. The yeast warms up and spreads its culture throughout the vast amount of flour.

Two important points come to mind here. First, we can't watch seeds germinating in the ground or see the action of yeast. They are hidden from us, and some secret force is at work. Secondly, the results happen slowly. But after a time you have a shrub large enough for animals to shelter in, and bread enough to feed a hundred people. The Kingdom of God comes a little bit at a time: it is perhaps the Messiah buried in the ground, or the sacrifice of his followers, that slowly becomes resurrection and hope and life to all those who come after; or, it is protection for the little ones, the young ones in the faith, who nest safely in the branches of the tree. Perhaps the Kingdom of God is the truth hidden within misunderstood words and teachings, but gradually coming to light and displaying the real, spiritual essence of God's commands- *given out of love for us*: religion for us, for our

freedom, not for our subjugation. And perhaps the Kingdom is a little, bent woman made straight and set free, and then the next little woman, and a man, and a child. One person at a time, a family, adding to the Kingdom of God a little bit at a time, until it is a mass of people praising God for what he has done.

And so, we come here. God's Kingdom enters our lives, maybe we don't understand how. But we are saved to be citizens in the realm of the Glorious King. We still abide on this globe, where we face trouble and doubt and hurt and loss, but the healing of the woman gives us hope, the words of emancipation spoken by Jesus to the woman comfort us. We come to sit in this building, and to worship, believing God will come close and see us too, and call to us and free us from our separate bondages, and all of us together believing God will take us to be his own children, made whole and hopeful and free.

We want to emphasize the goodness and compassion of Jesus, so we delight in the healing stories of the gospels. But that may sometimes leave the story incomplete. In our passage Jesus heals, but he also stands as judge against religion. But we cannot read this miracle on the Sabbath as Jesus' condemnation of one religion just to approve a new one in its place- not as the victory of Christianity over Judaism,

but as the power and rule of God moving in the world. So we understand that one act of mercy, like Jesus healing the woman, may be the small thing that changes and blesses the church and the world; and it may be that very act of breaking a religious law is the small thing that brings about God's Kingdom- a little at a time. The parables help explain the meaning of the miracle: Judaism in the time of Jesus, and Christianity today- and perhaps all religions- are the garden where the mustard seed is planted; and the flour into which the yeast is put. And every act of kindness inside and outside the church is "the sign of the breaking-in of God's reign" over evil and suffering (Fred Craddock).

There were and are many religions. But there is one Kingdom. And Jesus came to show us how to enter it, and how we should live in it. Jesus did not proclaim the Kingdom to make more people like us, or more like any of the other religions, but to make available God's love, and to offer mercy and forgiveness and fellowship so that all God's creatures can experience the peace of Jesus Christ and God's love that never dies.

Acts of kindness are the way we participate in God's Kingdom- reaching out to the needy and the desperate, to give them aid and comfort: this is how we transform the life and worship of the church into a new Sabbath of hope and peace.

