

The Ties That Bind
August 21, 2016 Luke
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I keep thinking about the synagogue leader in today's gospel. In fact, I can't get him out of my mind. Perhaps it is because it is so easy to hear this story and know who the hero is and who the "bad" guy is; and clearly the synagogue leader is the "bad guy".... After all, Luke describes him as "indignant" and he IS attacking the clear hero, Jesus. Our beloved hero calls him a hypocrite in front of the entire crowd. It all seems to easily add up to "bad guy" for the synagogue leader, doesn't it? And I suppose in light of what Jesus is trying to teach us all in this event, the leader IS a bad guy in the sense that he is standing in the way of our lesson, of what Jesus wants us to understand.

But it seems as well that this guy is really acting out of a good place in his heart, trying desperately to "do the right thing." And then there is Jesus' terse reaction to him. That familiar way Jesus has of cutting down anyone he feels is missing the important. I have to be honest and say that sometimes Jesus' reaction to others is rather blunt and demanding. Jesus can come across so rude sometimes.

And I find myself feeling a bit of sympathy for the synagogue leader. For if we really look at his plea to the crowds, we see quite a bit of rationale and even compassion there. The leader says 'there are other days to be cured; in fact six of seven days a week are GOOD for curing...come back then....come back on a day designed for healing.' He doesn't deny that this poor woman needs curing. In fact he offers her many other options; six other options to be exact. He offers her Sunday through Friday. She is not in a dire condition, her situation is not urgent; death is not imminent. Her condition is chronic and needs attention to better the quality of her life but in no way is it necessary for her to be cured NOW.

In no way does the leader imply this woman should NOT be cured, just not today. And why not today? Because today, the seventh day, this is the Sabbath; a sacred day. A day that God has decreed set aside. A day that every good Jew observes with the utmost of seriousness as well as thanks. Sabbath is a gift from God. A gift to replenish ourselves and a gift for time to worship God in the most sincere ways. Sabbath was and is a day of great joy and celebrating for God's chosen people. But there were 39 activities that were considered "creative" for the ancient Israelites and therefore prohibited on the Sabbath. And to indulge in any of these was punishable by stoning. To break Sabbath was the utmost of sins. And this brings me back again to our synagogue leader. He is faced with leading his people in their faith. And the law is clear; creative activity on the Sabbath is prohibited...has been for centuries. And now this upstart, this rather "in your face" Jesus guy, is not only engaging in a creative act, curing on the Sabbath, but doing so right within the synagogue!

So as I said, I'm thinking about this poor leader a lot this week. As the leader, he has much responsibility for his flock. He has responsibility to set the right tone for the people. He is to lead by example and guidance. And it seems to me this guy is taking this role very seriously. And it's not just about Jesus' actions, what about the poor woman who is part of this whole escapade as well? What is to become of her given her involvement in the breaking of Sabbath law? What's a good leader to do? Clearly he must protect this woman, and the others who witness this event. If he lets this continue, they might all begin to think that there is wiggle room in the Sabbath law. And then what might become of them? As well, he is responsible for seeing that the law, the traditions of the faith, are observed and celebrated. His role is to protect the faith traditions.

Maybe I should add here a caveat of Jewish law concerning the Sabbath. If a life was in danger, one was not merely allowed, but REQUIRED, by law to break the Sabbath. Which of course brings me right back to thinking about this synagogue leader! Once again, it seems to me that he is actually upholding his

responsibilities quite well. He has evaluated that no life is in danger, he has allowed that this woman could use healing, and he has taken all of that into consideration with regards to the day of the week; it is SABBATH. If you need healing, but aren't dying right now, come back tomorrow, or the next day, or the next..... Lives that are not in danger must wait, and this is according to God's law.

AH...but is it? Is this the piece Jesus wants us to look at differently?

Exactly what IS a life in danger? Clearly for the synagogue leader, danger means physical death. This woman is not facing physical death. But what does Jesus say? Jesus looks not at death, but at life. What does it mean to live? What is required for life? He points out to all the crowd, but most specifically the leader, that everyone unties their livestock and leads them to water on the Sabbath.

Water, that element necessary for life. No one would think of letting their animals go thirsty on the Sabbath. It seems Jesus is telling the leader and the crowd, and of course us, to see that God's desires for us are for life. The woman who needs healing is described as being crippled; she is bent over almost in half. She cannot stand straight. And what we understand from that is that she also cannot see the world, life around her. She is relegated to a view of the ground. Overlooked by all who tower over her. Bound by her infirmity.

And so Jesus heals her, he sets her free; he gives her back her sight of the world and life around her. And in doing so, he declares to the crowd: this is what is important; this is what God's love is about....it is about freedom. Freedom from bondage. God's love is NOT about tradition or law. It is NOT about the way we have always done things. It is NOT about the past, it is about NOW.

And that is where we begin to understand his impatience with the synagogue leader. The leader could not see past tradition, past the way we have always done Sabbath, past "the past" to see God's truth in that particular moment. God's truth that love and freedom are more important than tradition and law. The leader has lost sight of why we do what we do, in God's name. The leader is stuck, unable to see the moment for what it is, unable to break the ties that bind him to the past.

I am reminded here of the tale of the Easter ham. A young girl watches intently as her mother begins the preparation of Easter dinner. The mother removes the large ham from the refrigerator and peels off the butcher wrappings. Setting the ham on the cutting board, she proceeds to cut an inch off of each end of the ham and then prepares the cloves and pineapple that will stud the outside of the meat. The young daughter watches with curiosity and finally asks "Mom, why do you cut the ends of the ham off?" Her mother stops, looks at her daughter in thought and finally replies "I have always cut the ends off the Easter ham. That is what we have always done, even when I was a young girl like you, my mother cut the ends off the Easter ham. But I don't recall WHY. Let's call grandma and find out why." So they call grandma and ask why she always cut the ends of the Easter ham off. "Why, that is the way MY mother always prepared the Easter hams" says grandma. "I guess I never thought to ask her why." So the young girl and her mother place a call to great grandmother. Upon hearing their question "Why do we cut the ends off the Easter ham?" she bursts out laughing. "Well" she replied, "I never had a pan big enough for the large hams we needed to feed everyone who came for Easter dinner. And I never had enough money to buy a bigger pan. So to make the ham fit, I had to cut off the ends!" HMMMMM.....some traditions die hard, some get started for the strangest reasons!

It seems to me Jesus would applaud this young girl's question; why do we do what we do. But he also pushes us to go further with our questioning. Should we still be doing this? Does what we do fit the needs of the situation? Have we listened for God's call in this moment, to guide our actions? Does what we do bring life, or does it bring death? What exactly, is binding us? What is crippling us? What can we NOT see because we are bent over, staring at the ground? What are we tied to that we need to loose?

What do we continue to do, merely because “that is what we have always done?” These are important questions for all of us.

On an individual level, these are questions that must be asked every day of our lives. What cripples us? What binds us? How are we blind to where God is trying to lead us? We can become crippled so easily, bent over, unable to see clearly... without ever realizing it. Are we enslaved by our possessions or the pursuit of MORE possessions? Is our exercise routine over zealous? Has our desire to get ahead in the corporate world turned us into workaholics? Do we lose our lives in alcoholism or dysfunctional relationships? Do we worry excessively about finances, or our health, or our status? Have we let the internet, video games, or social media replace our time with loved ones? Do we insist on traditions in our families, particularly at holiday times, which make life harder rather than enhancing our times together?

And the questions are the same for us as the church. Where are we bound to the past, unable to see the needs of the present moment? Where do we cling tightly to the way we have always done things missing out on new opportunities? Where do we insist that the church today must look, act and behave like the church of yesterday? Where are we stuck, bent over, relegated to a view of the ground, a rut if you will. Where have we overlooked the vast cultural changes affecting us, because we cannot stand up straight and see the reality of the world around us?

These are the most important questions that face us as a congregation today. While our condition is not critical, we are not at death’s door, if we don’t loose ourselves from the ties that bind, we will never find the freedom to be the strong and growing presence of Christ that we are called to be. If we take the approach of the synagogue leader, thinking we can wait until another day, we miss God’s call to full and abundant life now RIGHT NOW.

But hearing that call is going to require us to make some hard changes and shift our ways of thinking; just like our synagogue leader. We cannot be complacent about our situation, we cannot think to ourselves that we have time to spare. We cannot fool ourselves that holding tightly to the past will get us to the future. This week I got quite a shock when I stepped into Starbucks for the first time in months and months. My mind could not make sense of my memory of Starbucks; how it had always been, and what I walked into this week. Did you know Starbucks now serves beer and wine????!!! I could not get this to compute in my brain. As I scanned and scanned for the tea menus, my brain literally could not decipher the first menu board. Wine...red wines, white wines. Beer, too. Where was I?

Well, I was in a place that refused to be defined by its past. I was in a place that, despite its healthy success, was still choosing to read the signs of the times and adjust. I was in a place that was still committed to its original goals; serve beverages and get people together, but a place that was willing to ask deep questions. What should our business look like today? How has the world changed in ways that Require us to change? Why do we do what we do? Should we still be serving beverages today as we always did before?

It is time for the church to ask the same questions and respond. It is time for us to be like that little girl and ask why we do everything we do. It is time for us to be a Starbucks church; to figure out how to share God with our community as it is TODAY, not last year, or five years ago, or 20 years ago, but TODAY. Because Jesus tells us TODAY is the day to loosen the ties that bind. Amen.